

The Last Man on Earth

This is a science fiction story. The events are real, but they take place in the future. They involve a regular science fiction theme called the last man on Earth. But unlike other versions of this classic narrative, this one occurs amid a thick population of humans, all of them busy with their lives to the point of frantic distraction. Our main character, however, is not so busy. In fact, he has nothing to do, no one to talk to, nowhere to be at any particular time except perhaps where he already is. And all this because, unlike absolutely everyone else on the planet, he does not own a cell phone.

We first encounter him on an irksome quest for an urban pay phone to call his new girlfriend. There aren't any around. He steps into the street to get a better view of the far sidewalks in both directions. Nothing. He reaches into his pocket and fumbles with some spare change. How much will he need? It's been ages since he called anyone. He gave up long ago, when the automatic caller ID on all cell phones began broadcasting the single word "loser" for any calls on an analog line. He never found this out.

He asked his new girlfriend about it and she reassured him that really he wasn't a loser. In a sultry voice, she added, "You're magnificent." He had no idea what she meant by either remark.

But the second was the real puzzle. He didn't feel magnificent. He felt strongly out of place. He knew he was falling out of touch with the world. He

knew he was something of a dinosaur, still accustomed to phone keys as big as tabs of acid, bearing legible numbers and letters. When he looked at a cell phone, he truly wondered how to dial it at all. There weren't any keys, just a fingerprint pad for one's thumb that responded uniquely to each person by drawing from a universal government-owned satellite database and dialing the number of the friend, relative, or business that the user was currently thinking, provided it matched his sanctioned list.

Our hero hailed a taxi. He climbed in and gave instructions to take him around the block.

The driver said, "Huh?"

Our hero said, "You know. Around the block." He slowly carved a circle in the air with his finger. The driver carved one too. But his was turned on its side to suggest a daft passenger.

"You should have called," said the driver. "We usually don't take fares from the street. No screening. It isn't legal."

"I understand," our hero said.

"No," said the driver, "I don't think you do." He turned away from his passenger and edged the car into the nearest lane of traffic. "This good?" he asked at the next corner, pulling to a stop.

"I need a pay phone," our hero said reluctantly.

"A what?"

"You heard me, a payphone."

"And I need a bucket of shit!" Our hero was silent. He looked out the back windows, searching for signs of telecommunication. "Look, buddy, we can do this all day, but it's bound to take forever. Listen to me. I know where there's a pay phone, but it's a really long drive."

"Really?" our hero asked, cocking his head.

"Yes, really. You'll have to pay me in advance. That's how far it is. Not that I don't trust you," the driver said with clear sarcasm. He rolled his eyes at how crazy this fare was.

Our hero wasn't looking at him anymore. He was reaching deep into his pockets for anything other than the change he was carrying. He found a pair of fifty dollar bills and wrist watch with no band. It was audibly ticking. Both men heard it and reacted to it.

Our hero said, "I'm late to meet my girlfriend."

At the same time the driver said, "I'll be honest with you, pal, because you seem a little lost, a little weird really, maybe sleep deprived if you want my first impression. Anyway, it'll take a lot longer to get you to a pay phone than to purchase a cell phone and a plan for it and enter your party demographics into the main satellite feed. You'll be waiting 30 minutes at most." By then the driver had heard and commiserated with our hero's last remark. He added, "I'm doing you a favor. At my own expense too."

"I don't want a cell phone!" our hero exclaimed.

"Suit yourself," said the driver, suddenly sensitive. He turned around in his seat and began circling the block.

Our hero sat in the back quietly, hardly aware of his surroundings. He wasn't looking for a pay phone anymore, but stewing in his anger. How many people had told him to get a cell phone already? The truth was it was fewer and fewer. What began as a tidal wave of insistence had degenerated into forgetting all about him. This was a valuable lesson about disregarding people's advice, that often they conclude you're not worth anymore. Or worse, stop talking to you altogether. No sanctioned list bears your name.

But that's precisely why he wouldn't take the advice. Or so he told people, practically climbing on a soapbox every time he defended himself, wildly overcompensating for the secret reason, which he was too afraid to reveal. He shouted, "The government owns your privacy. Your name is floating in space. Aliens are stealing your identity. You're an alien too. I'm the last person on Earth. I'm the last person on Earth!"

His ravings grew bolder and bolder. He nearly pulled out his hair in the theatrical performance of them. On several occasions he became so hoarse that his voice turned to static, an effect he seemed to like, hissing at strangers as they passed him in the street, always with their phones at their ear and their mouths in full self-important and voluble jabber.

During these reflections, the cab completed its fifth complete loop around the block. "Seen one yet?" the driver asked. Our hero leaned forward in his

seat and passed him the two fifties without a word. He leaned back in his seat and wound the wrist watch until the spring froze.

"I'm the only person left with any sense of quality craftsmanship," he called out for the driver to absorb. "I'm the only one who isn't digital. I'm the only one with any secrets." Here the great secret at the heart of his refusal to buy a cell phone passed through his thoughts.

The driver said nothing. Like everyone else he no longer listened to our hero once a certain threshold was passed. It was the kind of treatment you get used to, and begin to exploit.

Our hero said, "Do you want to know about my girlfriend? I'll bet you do. I'll bet you want to know why I'm late and what I'm late for, and what happens if I'm late, and how the sex is." It was no use. This closing non sequitur did not elicit the slightest rise in the driver, who continued circling the block, the meter climbing silently in red digital numbers. "Well, the reason I'm late is that I had an appointment with a man who sold me a weapon of mass destruction. That's what I say to all the superior fucks who look down their noses at me and call me a Luddite. I say Bloodite, is what I say." Still nothing from the driver, just another right turn and slight acceleration after. "And what I'm late for is a surveillance mission to scope out the easiest possible hit on the President of the United States, who's the father of my girlfriend," our hero added. Again the driver turned right and indulged a heartless yawn.

"If I'm late," our hero disclosed, lowering his voice, "the world goes on as it is, further down the toilet like a dead or dying goldfish. And no one learns a thing from all our technological advances except how to wear shackles willingly without the slightest peep of protest. Imagine it. All that fucking talking and no one saying anything profound."

The driver lowered his window and propped his elbow above the door. He was tempted to redirect our hero's last assertion back in his face, to say I know exactly what you mean, but he refrained. Don't engage the crazy ones. It was the first hard knock in every driver's career and this driver's lumps were already far behind him.

But something else stopped him too. He was getting confused. All that driving in circles was playing with his mind, making him dizzy. He was seeing red spots, not recognizing them promptly as traffic signals, not stopping for them until the last possible moment, jerking the brakes. A bead of sweat ran down his forehead and dropped into the jumble of t-shirt above his distended belly. He wiped his brow with the back of his forearm. It was all he could do not to voice the strange opinion that he agreed with his passenger.

Meanwhile our hero was finishing his litany. The facetious concluding words, "And the sex is beyond belief!" hung in the air like a cloud of talcum powder, slowly dispersing like snow.

"Buddy, I need a cigarette," the driver said, reaching into his breast pocket and nervously freeing a soft pack. He shook one loose and stuck it

between his lips without ever handling it. The pack tossed aside on the opposite seat, he reached into the dashboard ashtray for his flameless lighter and snapped on the heat cone. His first inhalation restored some semblance of his prior ease and he exhaled with obvious relief.

"I usually do too," our hero responded, "afterwards. But weren't you going to take me to a pay phone?"

"Oh yeah," the driver said, remembering.

"I gave you two fifties." But the driver had no idea where they were anymore and looked out his open window, wondering.

The two men drove together for the better part of the next hour. Our hero timed it to the minute on his wrist watch, enjoying the circles of the second hand as a mirthful reminder of how the ride started. Otherwise he sat deep in his seat with his hands on his lap, palms upward. Without fully voicing them, he recited long strings of numbers under his breath: five, two, four, four, seven, one, the list went on and on, like stunning recital of Pi. On occasion he tried to abbreviate the sequence by turning two and three numbers into their greater equivalent, such as calling a one and six sixteen instead, or 104 for a one, zero, four. But this shorthand didn't work. It contradicted his parallel activity of matching each spoken number with its rightful amount of fingers, and he only had 10, which was already shorthand for 0. That pseudo-metric circularity was confusing enough without higher multiplication.

For the driver the activity in the backseat was a bit of puzzle. He sat forward in his seat now and then to get a better view of it, but that adjustment of his torso put a consider strain on the steering wheel, which was acting as the fulcrum. The driver could snatch glimpses and nothing more. His passenger's hands were too close to the back of the extended front seat, hidden behind the cheap black vinyl. The driver huffed at his exclusion for this mysterious ritual, but failed to interrupt it.

When our hero had practiced the sequence of numbers repeatedly and to his own patient satisfaction, he looked up into the rear view mirror, catching the driver's suspicious right eye, and asked, "How does it feel? Not so good right?" He was referring to being left out.

"No," the driver admitted.

Our hero told him not to fret. It wouldn't go on much longer, he said. But now his point of reference was far less clear.

The two men sat in silence for a while as the city scrolled by outside the windows. They passed the important national monuments, whose imposing grandeur was hard to deny. In closer proximity to each, they saw uniform collections of hot dog vendors, tourists, people with cameras that were really just cell phones. The sky was overcast and gray and many pedestrians and visitors at these sites were holding sealed umbrellas, sometimes peering at the sky for a guess at its cryptic intentions.

Our hero resumed his counting exercise. He held his hands up in the open space behind the front seat and ran his fingers through an impressive choreography of mutating claw positions. "It's a form of Morse code," he explained, reading the driver's first question, misleading it. "Only I'm not spelling S-O-S or using letters at all."

"Then it ain't Morse code," the driver balked. For the first time our hero noticed a naval tattoo on the driver's right forearm, lurking beneath a thick tuft of blond hair. It was hard to make out the image, concealed in this manner but also washed out from years of exposure to the sun, but our hero squinted it into focus as an anchor that was also a face. No, it was a face that was also an anchor. Or was it a crucifix. It was probably a cell phone, the standard line of thought whenever he got stumped in any way.

"You were military?" he asked. The driver took hold of the steering wheel at three and nine o'clock—which isn't an army way of stating when, but where—and related to his passenger that yes, he had served in the navy, as a transport captain, hauling VIPs and their belongings back and forth between larger boats on a scout class, so they didn't have to pull into port. "It was an odd posting," he admitted. "I never much knew why it mattered to save 15 minutes with a personal escort between ships, but you don't ask those things. Asking isn't your job. It's a lot of driving a cab," he said with an echo of his original contempt. "You don't ask."

But our hero wanted to know. "What's that tattoo?" he inquired. "It's how I knew you were military."

"This?" the driver said, lifting the back of his forearm into plain sight. "What the hell do you think it is?"

"I thought it was an anchor," our hero confessed, "but looking at in the light of day, well, it isn't, is it?"

"No, it's a god damned bow and arrow, with a big hand pulling back the string, like this," the driver said, cocking back his arm. The fat nub of his elbow drew directly before our hero's gaping eyes. Before the driver had released the pretend arrow, his passenger bit him.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed, jerking his arm away. The cab fish-tailed into the neighboring lane. "Are you crazy?" He corrected the car and rolled his arm around for an awkward investigation of the damage. It was too hard to tell if there was any. There were no signs of spittle or obvious teeth marks either. Just a fading current of pain.

Our hero sat back in his seat and leaned his head to the side, relaxing. He was the picture of innocence and compassion. "I don't think you hit the bulls-eye with that one," he stated blandly.

"You bit me," the driver accused.

"I what?" our hero asked.

"You bit my god damned elbow."

"I did nothing of the sort. Are you out of your mind? Why in the world would I bite your god damned elbow."

"I don't know!" the driver huffed. To get attention? To confirm there was really a conversation taking place between two flesh and blood beings? To enjoy to the fullest that someone was actually talking to him, taking him into a verbal embrace of any kind, despite his not owning a cell phone? None of these guesses or the ten thousand like them, all equally bulls-eyes, occurred to the driver at that moment. Like everyone else, he hardly knew our hero at all, and certainly not enough to ascertain his secret motives, which circled like sharks around a basic core of loneliness and resentment, the twin chums in the island paradise of himself. Nor was the driver inclined to develop this understanding. It ran against the grain of his job and his habits.

They were a curious pair, the one trying hard not to develop any bonds with the people temporarily in his care, the other wishing for the lowest whisper of greeting and recognition from anyone. If only they could switch lives for a few moments, experience the other side. How far it might have gone toward putting their hearts right.

But our hero slid along sideways in the backseat until he was leaning against the door behind the driver, completely out of his sight. He looked out the window and dryly frowned at the passing world, which was now mostly billboards and one-way windows that reflected an absent sun. The sky was as overcast as his feelings, pregnant with rain.

"You can't sit on that side," the driver clarified. "That door is under repair. It pops open sometimes, locked or unlocked. You have to sit in the middle or on the right." Our hero slid to the middle and paused to cast a sorrowful glance into the rear view mirror, where he met the fixed eyes of the driver, and could not soften them. Then he slid to the right, propping his forehead against the glass for another view of passing billboards and windows. He exhaled slowly, deflating.

The cars in neighboring lanes were now visible to him. He watched one drop behind as the cab sped past it. The light from its headlights shone in the afternoon gloom. But the driver was nowhere to be seen. The long, sloping windshield reflected the strobing chaos of occasional overpasses and highway signs, but concealed its interior.

Our hero shifted his gaze ahead, where another car was coming into view. It was a big silver Volvo, square and solid. The rear bumper bore a perfectly affixed sticker that read, "Warning: I drive like you!" Although a light joke, the idea of it thrilled our hero deeply, as if here was a person with whom to bridge the widest gaps.

He watched the car get closer and closer until he was staring at the driver's side back door. Through the window he observed a dark brown leather briefcase, an empty safety seat for an infant, and a bottle of designer water, although the brand was unknown to him. He became thirsty at the sight of it and smacked his lips to test their dryness.

As the front half of the Volvo came clearly into view, our hero was still smacking his lips. The Volvo's driver stared at him blankly for a moment. His eyes betrayed nothing, not even recognition. It was the kind of reception our hero was all too accustomed to. He frowned. He pressed his forehead and face against the glass until his nose flattened.

"You're just like all the others," he said, fogging the window.

He could not be sure of the ensuing response, only that one came. Yes, the lips of the driver opposite the cab were now moving very flagrantly. It was an answer for sure. No, I'm not like all the others. Or: can you please repeat that? Or: I love you too. It was hard to make out the words. Our hero had never read lips in his life, or not well anyway.

"Slow down," he mouthed with terrific exaggeration. He raised his hands into view and pantomimed the request, suddenly horrified that the Volvo driver would misinterpret and ease off the gas. "Not the car," our hero added, unsure how his hands pertained here. He squeezed them into nervous fists and pressed them against his cheeks.

The Volvo driver continued to look at him blankly, but without an immediate response. He seemed to be processing speech, his head tilted at a slight angle, his eyes drifting up. Then his head began nodding and his mouth kicked into gear for a very long reply. He spoke for almost a minute, frequently turning away to view the road ahead.

These latter aspects of the Volvo driver's response drove our hero mad with blissful consternation. He wanted to take his partner in this silent dialogue and shake him by the lapels to knock some sense into his head. But the feeling was friendly, almost loving. "I need you to speak to me directly," he said. "I need you speak in shorter sentences." He bounced up and down on his seat from the electrifying excitement of how futile these demands were. The Volvo driver wasn't looking at him long enough to receive the full instruction to look at him that long. It was a Catch-22. And the need for shorter sentences was like asking a tiger to change its stripes.

That is, the Volvo driver was already jabbering away again, sometimes facing the cab, sometimes not. He seemed not to care either way, as if taking joy in being coy about the entire discussion. What else was left for our hero to do except ferret out what little sense he could in the vain hope it might shed fragments of light on what else to do? He concentrated as hard as he could on the Volvo driver's lips, mimicking their movement on his own, hoping to coax an echo from himself. He huffed and puffed throughout this mirroring exercise as if he were playing a wind instrument, sounding it out. And in some cases, he did discover a word or turn of phrase.

In fact, the very thing that most threatened the conversation turned out to be its greatest asset as well, at least for a moment. Our hero watched the Volvo drop behind a bit as the cab outpaced it, but this change in relative positions brought the driver's face into view uninterrupted. The line of sight to

his mouth was clear and steady. The words streaming out were there for the plucking, one after the next.

Our hero mimicked them with rapt attention, sounding them out faithfully and intelligibly. "I'd like that," he repeated. "Yes, it's my favorite too. How about tonight? I can't wait to meet you." The string of agreeable phrases went on, but our hero could not repress an admiring smile for the man on the other side of the dashed white line, receiving him so cordially. It brought tears to the eyes and our hero wept and glowed simultaneously.

He was wiping the precious nectar of tears from his cheek when he noticed the Volvo driver was wearing an earpiece, that a wire ran from his chin to his nether regions, blocked from view by the dashboard. The top end, also blocked from view, must have ascended his far cheek. Where did this wire go? What was it for? Our hero knew right away, freezing inside. The horrible wire connected firmly to a cell phone! The Volvo driver was talking to someone else, offering his sweet flattery to another.

The shock of it was heartbreaking and our hero began to cry for reasons altogether different than his first. He hated himself for the vulnerability of it, having sworn off all sincere openness to anyone, imagining himself the sole occupant of a voluntary prison cell, loving the word for it as a diminutive of its source. He repeated it again. "A cell. A cell." But this time with revulsion and morbid hate. "I hate everyone," he declared, loud enough for the driver to cab driver to cock his ears, anticipating danger. "I'm still reading the lips of the other

guy," our hero lied. "He seems to be crazy or something." But the Volvo was far behind and its windshield reflected the world.

The cab driver said, "Look buddy, I've got a question for you. If you're late to see your girlfriend and you want to give her a call, that's fine. But why would you go all this way instead of directly to her house? It's just making you a helluva lot later and then you'll have to drive back. By the way," he added, "I have a fare waiting and I can't wait around for you."

"You don't have a fare," our hero confronted him, but the anger words lilted with further irrepressible tears.

"No, I do," said the cabby. "Look." He picked up his cell phone and held it plainly in view between them. The action was something like showing a cop you took your wallet from your coat pocket, not a gun. When his intentions were clear, the cab driver pushed his thumb against the small scanner square and thought about a number. The phone audibly dialed and rang. He did not put it to his ear, but left it exposed.

A voice at the other end picked up. It spoke heartlessly, repeating a well worn phrase: "Eddie's Cabs." At this point the driver put the phone against his head and started to talk, but also hung up.

"It's me Tank. I'm out on 330 with a fare. What have you got lined up for me?" He waited several seconds saying mostly, "Uh huh, uh huh... But this guy may need a ride back," he added. He said, "Oh, I understand. So Jerry's out there right now. He'll take him. Great." He snapped the phone shut like a

castanet and explained to our hero that an exceptional colleague named Jerry was out this way already and waiting rather eagerly for a lucrative reason to head back to city center. "He'll give you a ride all right," he said. "He'll thank you for it. He'll be your pal." He was playing a developing hunch about his passenger's greater weaknesses.

"Thank you, Tank," our hero said flatly, leaning forward from his seat, eyeing the license placard above the glove compartment, noticing the name, which read Peter Walinski. The picture looked similar enough, but nothing about the name suggested Tank to our hero. "That's an interesting name," he told the driver. "How'd you get it? Tank."

"I told you I'm an old military man," the driver chuckled.

"You said you were in the navy," our hero reminded him.

"So big deal."

"Well, what do tanks have to do with the navy?"

"What does anything have to do with anything?" the cab driver gruffly asserted. He said, "Geez." He eased the car into the next lane over and then the next until he was in the rightmost lane. They passed under a squalid overpass with an exit sign indicating their destination in ½ mile. The road ahead was abraded and uninviting.

"I don't know," our hero said, "I just wish someone would think about me for a change, that I might prefer an elegant lie to a poor one, that the poor lie is really just another form of neglect and indifference." He spoke his next thought

only in mind that people were the same all over and hardly worth the effort of hating them anymore. "Are we almost there?" he asked.

The driver was happy enough to change the subject. "Listen, pal," he said, "I'm bringing you to a great pay phone." He offered this remark as some sort of condolence, but it was not received. Our hero's mind was now the icy equivalent of a blaring busy signal, something the world no longer knew, having off-ed it for voice mail.

The cab left the highway with its occupants in silence. They traveled only one block after the exit ramp and pulled into a convenience store, on the side of which, near a festering dumpster, hung an oval kiosk with a picture of a phone painted on it. The driver pulled in front of it and extended his arm across the long front seat to the opposite window, offering the device as some kind of gift, the fulfillment of a promise. Our hero studied it from the cab and slowly opened the door and got out. He closed the door caringly and stepped back. As the cab popped back into gear, he noticed the writing on the front door, without much interest about it. It read Yellow Cab. There was no mention of Eddie, although the car was not yellow either, but alien green.

Our hero watched it pull away and stood alone in front of the stinking dumpster for a very long time. He seemed at home there, as if that location best summarized his isolated life on this planet. He spent a long time mulling things over, not particularly absorbed in the process, but letting this thoughts drift around in his mind. Then he reached into his pocket to recall the change he

was carrying. A heavy handful somewhat larger than a golf ball filled the palm of his hand. He squeezed it like a stress ball. The slick metal surfaces distilled a cold sweat from his fingers.

There was something our hero had always hoped and now he realized the hope was about to perish. Or no, he reconsidered. It wasn't the hope that would perish, but the possibility of having it happen. The hope would continue, at least for a little while. He understood it would linger. He understood there is never an answer that completely resolves things, not for the problems of real life, which isn't about numbers. But numbers were a part of it. They were the part from which he believed he could begin.

The hope itself was that people would call him "our hero", and say it in that way that suggests he had saved them. "Our hero!" He could hear a thick crowd of admirers chiming the words in loud unison, lifting him onto the wide sea of their shoulders, carrying him aimlessly to applaud his spectacular triumph. He was the last person on Earth without a cell phone. His vigilant refusal to participate actively in the monstrous degeneration of human etiquette and adult attention spans thanks to perpetual telephoning was the one saving grace that somehow dismantled the system, overthrew the hypnosis against reason and virtue induced by a controlling government. Everyone would wake up as if from a dream, a nightmare in retrospect, viewed from the waking state. They would hail him as a hero. Call him one. "Our hero! Our hero!" Those sweet words,

uttered even once with sincerity, would be more than enough to make up for long years of disregard and disdain.

But the numbers were against that outcome. There was no way to play his cards differently. The method of transmission was somewhat sloppy that way, or else exceptionally efficient, depending on how you looked at it. Our hero liked to regard it as poetic. In his angrier moments, which somehow conjured forward a deep sense of aesthetic reverie, our hero liked to recognize there was no method more perfect for how well it closed the circle, completing a geometric journey that Euclid himself would have erased. A tabula rasa. A palimpsest. These were the notions his poetic sensibilities alighted on as he stewed over the hatred at the core of the crime.

Our hero was really a Romantic at heart, which explained not only the sometimes indulgent degrees of his suffering, but also his willingness to ignore the counteraction of the numbers, which plainly stated he would never receive the acclaim that would heal him, not by going forward. But it was too late for that warning, and too late was exactly the sort of sentiment that Romantics love most, steeped in Fate and painful pathos. And underneath those, a piercing sense that he wanted to proceed.

He pulled the coins from his pocket and stepped over to the phone, side-stepping rinds of rotten fruit and a thick mud puddle in a tire track. The sky was more gray than before and ominous clouds gathered over the heart of the city,

which stood at some distance. Our hero looked at the pay phone and drew a deep breath.

The neglected device was an absolute relic, clearly not serviced in well over five years. The cord connecting the receiver and the large black box with the silver front panel and keypad was made of segmented silver that offered combined durability and flexibility, an unlikely pair. But the durability was now deeply in question as the cord frayed between every joint with a palm frond effect of fine splayed hairs radiating out in all directions. They looked rather soft, especially at the cord's looping nadir, but to the touch they were sharp and our hero's innocent impulse to gently stroke them resulted in an unexpected pin prick and a fresh blossom of blood on his finger tip.

Our hero looked at the phone with dismay. He wagged the bleeding digit at it as if giving a warning. But sustaining this sternness was not possible for him. It was too exciting to see a pay phone at all, to be in its holy company, as if plumbing an ancient tomb.

Our hero broke into a wide smile. He stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked on his trifling wound. With his other hand he lifted the receiver and tucked it between his cheek and shoulder.

The blue plastic of the earpiece was cold and solid in a way no cell phone could ever be. The substantial weight of the receiver was like a stone pillar for relieving the greatest stress. Our hero rolled the device in the crook of his neck and absorbed its arc of pressure. He raised and lowered his shoulder to work

the instrument into a series of sore points and chi centers. It was almost enough. He was almost satisfied, almost magically rehabilitated. He quietly moaned, mingling his voice into the pleasing vibrancy of the unrelenting analog dial tone. He closed his eyes and sputtered.

Meanwhile, two troubled teens rounded the corner of the convenience store and discovered our hero unzipping his fly. It wasn't clear which bodily liquid he was aiming to discharge. To the boys it hardly mattered. They shared a few spirited laughs at their discovery, slapping each other on the shoulder. The action turned into a playful fight, peppered with inbred invectives, until one of the boys accidentally dropped his soda. The open can gurgled brown liquid into the bald dirt.

The boy said, "Shit, man, look what your dumb displaced ass made me do!" Originally he was talking to his friend, but the words strayed to our hero as their preferred target. "Now pick that shit up!" Both boys stood with their arms crossed in hostile expectation. The can rolled sideways to a stop with a final surge that spun the open mouth of to the 12 o'clock position, preserving whatever liquid remained inside.

"I'm on the phone," our hero said feebly, zipping up his fly. He did not know where exactly to look. His eyes roamed the surrounding area without reaching any confident perch. They bounced from the first boy to the second, but off him too. The sky was too gray and monotonous to arrest them there

either. Finally they dropped to our hero's hands, imparting them the will to let go of his zipper.

"This cat's crazy," the second boy said to the first. They exchanged a knowing look, their minds coming together for a calculation of some sort that seemed to require two heads. They agreed.

The first boy stepped forward and the second boy followed. They came within a few feet of our hero, who was holding the phone, as if somehow, in accordance with a general truth about telephony, it could render him invisible. The rest was serendipity.

The first boy cocked his head and a little flash of recognition crossed his face, as if flagging an internal process of some kind. He reached inside his thick team jacket and dug around for something tucked in a pocket. The metal flash once as he pulled the instrument out with great speed. He flipped back the face plate and exclaimed into the tiny receiver area, "What! Go on!" His voice dripped with mounting hostility momentarily thwarted from our hero, who watched with wide eyes, transfixed.

He imagined for a second he had somehow placed the call himself, that the youth was now detained on the sly by the very person he intended to thrash or slander or whatever it was the boy had in mind. Our hero had little doubt the intention was violent in some manner. He stood and waited for the call to end, a familiar enough necessity in his life.

Meanwhile the idea of getting pummeled to within an inch of his life held a certain appeal for our hero. For one thing, as brushes with death often do, it was likely to awaken him to the many ways in which he was sleeping through life. He secretly set the intention to thank the two boys before they set about breaking his jaw. It was a Christian moment in his mind. His savior complex was a very active switchboard that day.

Another part of the appeal was the undeniable poetry on an eleventh hour reprieve by two guardian angels in the unlikely form of lanky thugs. Our hero paused to consider this vision, looking it up and down for any sign it was true, studying the boys. The first one was waiting for his caller to state his business. The second was rubbing his fist and waiting, staring our hero in the eyes, but not seeing him as human. Suddenly time was moving very slow, the way it does from inside a car crash, everything utterly transparent. Our hero knew he did not want to go through with it, but would.

It was rare for the first boy to answer his phone without reading the LED first and seeing who it was. A terrified look crossed his face as a shrill voice clearly laid into him for his hostile reception. The boy backed up a step and shook his head like a responsive marionette. "Yes, mama," he said, a pair of words he then repeated many times. When the conversation ended, he folded the phone and pressed it against his lips, shaking his head.

"You're lucky," he told our hero.

"Yeah," the second boy added, flaring his nostrils.

"Lucky," our hero repeated, reviewing the supernova of clarity from moments ago, foretasting its ensuing black hole. He did not feel lucky. But what was luck? He no longer knew.

The first boy whacked the second on the shoulder and they both spun around and walked away. When they reached the fallen can of soda, the second boy picked it up and swirled it, testing its contents. Satisfied by them, he threw the can end over end at our hero, hitting him square in the chest, a splash of brown foam crashing into his shirt and face. The boys hooted with laughter and jogged away. Our hero stood motionless, stunned. He licked hints of cola from his lips and smacked his lips. The can rocked at his feet on the hard earth until he crushed it with his foot.

Our hero wiped soda from his forehead with the back of his sleeve. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change, which he dropped somewhat carelessly onto the lower lip of the housing for the phone, losing a few to the ground.

It was a phone from the age when a full booth was no longer in style. Instead, the caller stood in the world at large, facing a big black box with a rounded rectangle of metal around it. If the whole arrangement could have been pushed onto its back, it may have looked like a city of some sort, with a low protective wall around it or possibly a waterless moat. The body of the phone would have been the main landmass, bearing tiny huts (the buttons) and a mysterious central palace or temple (the receiver), which connected back to

the people through a long unwieldy tunnel (the receiver cable). The slot for coins and the coin return lever would be some sort of mining and refining industry that made the city operational but sometimes failed, conducting an occasional inexplicable rejection procedure.

Our hero fed that business interest with a series of quarters. He heard the dial tone reassert itself in a slightly more cheerful register, a change in pitch that was pleasing to his ear for how subtle and obvious it was simultaneously. He liked the aesthetics of impossibilities like that one: subtle and obvious. After feeding in the coins, he held that hand in front of him to view it and recalled the first gestures from his counting session in the cab. He knew the sequences by heart, but he wanted to remind himself anyway.

After satisfactory review, our hero, having arrived at a multiple occurrence of the number one, lifted his extended index finger to the keypad and punched in a string of seven digits with great care. The buttons released clear analog tones when he pressed them, vibrant and reassuring. But the two key stuck. Our hero had to encourage it back to its resting position in order to stop it from sounding. He made a note of this development.

The phone rang and after three rings an automated service picked up, speaking only in similar analog tones. Our hero counted them off on his hand, performing spontaneous modulus 5 operations and noting the remainders. In this manner he was able to keep his other hand on the receiver, while his math hand ran the numbers. They matched. Our hero fed in a few more coins and

punched in the appropriate response. Again the voice at the other end spoke in a quick tonal jabber and waited.

At this point our hero performed the part of the process he least understood, following the exact instructions verbalized to him by the trader in weapons of mass destruction. He shaped his hand into a pattern identical to the dots on a die for the number five, his middle finger at the center, and rested the resulting claw on the keypad without engaging it yet, a caress much too tangled and cumbersome to have worked on a cell phone. Working lefty, our hero's index finger was on the number 3. His ring finger touched 1. His thumb and pinky pinched the pound#sign and star*keys respectively, suggesting the alpha and omega points on the human hand somehow corresponded to alien symbols completely removed from the core set of cardinal numbers, an esoteric whisper that our hero heard like thunder.

But still more he delighted, although with some distance, at the relative position of his middle finger, which sat on the number 8, the infinity sign. Look at it now. 8. You need not turn it on its side. Simply look at it in its naked vertical form. It can't help itself. It has to transmit infinity to you. Open your mind to perceive it and there it is, unavoidable, a single line that loops twice and returns to itself, repeating the motion forever. Infinity. The natural result in our gray matter of touching two smaller closed systems together, our gray matter itself such a system. The number 8 masquerading as an insignificant, drolly divisible nobody among its peers. In every way this taut spring of a number, 2

to the third power, the exact count of bits in a byte, the last ball standing in a good game of pool, the pronunciation of the word "(h)ate" by an ardent cockney, the hourglass figure of a woman and of Woman, the stacking of small bubbles which must eventually topple, popple, or perhaps drift away—yes, in every latent sense a forceful metaphorical catapult for the sensibilities and dire imaginings of our hero, clawing the phone.

But sweetest of all was the eight's irascible minister, our hero's slim, bookishly pale middle finger. In its present position, ducking downward with terrific vertical strain from a gesture otherwise slanted upward like the nose of an airplane at takeoff, in fact appearing not dissimilar therefore to the nose of a transatlantic concord, which peers up from the eyes but down from the nose, the finger in question was set apart from its colleagues like the only worthy envoy for plumbing a ranging bowling ball, an object remarkably similar to an eight ball, our hero also realized. But that idea, for all its possible variants, was minor in glee when compared to the simple, central, terrifically tangible feeling that held in this manner, our hero's middle finger, towering in reverse into freedom from its cohorts, was almost flying the bird.

Our hero lingered for a moment, before going through with his terrible business, to enjoy the full irony of flipping off mankind with an upside-down, somewhat barbed American Eagle, as the kids never call it. His hand was both the Eagle and its claw. He pressed his middle finger against the number 8, tickling it slightly, then setting all five proscribed keys down simultaneously for a

very strange, chromatic-sounding beep, through which, when two seconds had elapsed, he heard a wild cacophony of phone chatter, beeps of every kind and duration, many of them outside the normal tonal range of the keypad, peppered with response silences, sometimes long, so that our hero began to believe the quiet parts were actually tones outside his powers of hearing. This belief complicated the operation because our hero did not know when exactly to release the keys and finish the operation.

The trader in weapons of mass destruction had indicated a long silence and then our hero was to let go of the buttons and place a normal call. It was a feature of the system, the trader said, smiling like a charming salesman, that you have to talk to someone else before you finalize the arming mechanism, as a means of arming it. What's more, the person you called had to be willing to help you, which meant you were working with a partner or counting on a loved one, both possibilities that might dissuade you from proceeding. If so, you could put down the receiver without finishing the job and the preparatory button pushings would simply time out after two minutes. If not, you therefore had only two minutes to get on with it. The salesman called this time constraint a feature as well. He said two minutes is exactly right. You either want it or you don't. You need no longer to know.

Our hero waited with his fingers on the buttons through a very long period of response silence, hearing only the tonal drone of his five keys. He wondered to himself how anyone could know. He wasn't questioning the two

minute time limit, but rather the trader's assertion that two minutes is enough, that additional time is unnecessary. Our hero wondered how could anyone know that little claim if no one else could possibly have the experience. It was a once in a species occupation, wasn't it? So how in the world could someone know, really know, how much time was required? Our hero assumed the figure was based on psychological testing. His mind often gravitated to that explanation from repeated personal experience with it.

"Okay, two minutes," he thought, releasing the buttons. The phone did not go dead, but started ringing. Our hero remembered that part of the sale included handing the second party's phone number to the trader in advance. He listened to the third and fourth ring, secretly hoping for voice mail. For the first time in his life he wanted the missed connection. A woman picked up the phone and said, "hello?"

The greeting was a question, a mix of hopeful expectation and thorough unfamiliarity with the incoming number. Our hero shook the tension from the stiff fingers of his dialing hand and swallowed. "Hello," he said, waiting for the usual recognition of his voice.

"Hello?" the woman asked.

"It's me," he said flatly.

"Can you repeat that?" asked the woman. "I think we have a bad connection? Daddy?" she asked.

"Yes," the man lied, not meaning it, "I'm the President of the United States. Or soon to be," he added darkly. "I'm calling you on a pay phone because my airplane hit a satellite." There was a long sarcastic story, mostly aggrieved, forming in our hero's mind, but he also remembered the two minute time limit, agreeing with it now.

"Honey?" the woman said, locking on.

"Yes, it's me," our hero answered, smiling uncomfortably.

"Where are you?" the woman asked. "I've been waiting an hour." The woman paused. She said, "Daddy went on without us," a dog-eared remark our hero had heard many times, usually for no solid reason. In fact, he had never heard otherwise and the woman did not try to mask that truth anymore. Her voice was not conciliatory, but blasé, as if it simply has to be mentioned, for better or worse, if the Commander-in-Chief disembarks without you. Not to say so is also to say so, the woman knew.

"Yes," our hero conceded. He did not have time for his usual impotent tirade about bad manners, itself a case-in-point, however unconscious, as the blandest hypocrisies always are. Instead, he focused the energies from his year of presidential neglect, clenching the receiver his hand, and said to his girlfriend, "I need you to do something. It's going to sound weird."

"It usually does," she teased graciously.

"I need you to spell something on the phone for me. I need you to spell ping and then the word all."

"You're an hour late," the woman asked, "and you want to me spell the word pinball? P-I-N-B-A-L-L. There."

"No," our hero said, becoming impatient, "I want you to spell it with the phone keys, like a text message. Only the word isn't pinball. It's two words: ping and all. Not ball. No b. Or actually," he said, steering the extra letter to his advantage, "think of the b as upside down, so it looks like a g. Spell the word pinball with a g for the b."

"What are you talking about?" our hero's girlfriend, the daughter of the President of the United States, asked.

"Just do it. Please honey," our hero urged. "Spell pinball for me." She was silent for a moment, presumably studying the compact keypad on her secret service cell phone, which traced all calls automatically. Secret service phones were the only ones left with independent keypads in addition to the thumb scanner, which otherwise handled all outward dialing. You had to be in very special circles to get one, to qualify for it. The daughter of the President of the United States was in that kind of circles, as few people were. She therefore exercised the very uncommon privilege of manually dialing any number she liked without any line filtering by the phone conglomerate of where she was calling to or what she was thinking while doing it. She also enjoyed the perk of automatic and snappy geo-location of whoever called her.

"You're in Grovedale," she noted.

"Pinball," our hero repeated.

"What are you doing in Grovedale? Is that why you're late? You ought to tell me these things," she pointed out.

"Pinball!"

Our hero's girlfriend spoke as if remembering an ancient dream. "Oh, that again," she said. Her tone became pedantic, "You know the letters B and G don't look anything alike, upside down or not." Our hero considered this remark, studying the pay phone's keys.

"Shit!" he noted, not for the receiver to hear.

"What's the matter, baby?" his girlfriend asked.

"I wasn't thinking in capitals," he said.

"What?"

"I wasn't thinking in capitals. I was thinking in lowercase. B and G are the same in lowercase, upside down."

"That's terrific, baby," she patronized.

"No," said our hero, "type it. Type the word pinball," he said desperately, "but pretend it's in lowercase, with g instead of b." The conversation was now a perfect oafish echo of every attempt to connect to people in our hero's adult life, as the only man without a cell phone. Our hero pounded his free hand against the upper faceplate of the pay phone in a fist.

"Okay," his girlfriend consented. "I'm doing it now," she said, her voice a few feet from the phone.

Our hero pictured the device sitting in her curled palm, her slim index finger perched to peck out the necessary letters. He listened to the first sound, but it never came. He waited impatiently, wondering when the heck this awful woman was going to spell pinball already! He shook his head in frustration. He said, "Come on!" into the receiver, but it didn't matter because the phone was probably too far from her ear. "What is she waiting for?" he thought. "Get on with it," he thought. "Spell pinball. G for B!" Our hero was nearly pulling out his hair when his girlfriend's voice returned.

"I did it," she said, spelling the word back vocally.

"You wouldn't lie to me?" our hero asked.

"Yes," she replied, "I'm lying to you about typing the word pinball with a g for the b. It's my life's mission," she said.

"It could be," our hero mentioned. "You are the President's daughter. You might be working against me." His paranoia got the better of him and he elaborated from a long list of historical examples where children of politicians averted disaster, physical or otherwise.

"Well, I spelled it," our hero's girlfriend repeated. "P-I-N-g-A-L-L. I spelled it and I was careful about getting it right." She huffed. It was a sound that slides the need for an apology into view.

"I'm sorry," our hero offered, collecting himself, "I forgot that cell phones are digital so their buttons don't make sound. I was waiting to hear the analog sounds as you pushed the—"

The two minutes elapsed and the phone went dead for a microsecond. Then our hero heard what may have been a cell phone dropping to the floor at the other end, a body falling. There were light sounds and heavy sounds, both resolving into an empty silence. Our hero spoke into the silence repeatedly, asking his girlfriend if she was still there, was she okay, but there wasn't any answer, just the distant tin echo of his voice inside the void. The weapon of mass destruction was much quieter than he expected.

Our hero considered alternative possibilities, that maybe his girlfriend had merely hung up on him or his coins were expired and phone disconnected them, but he knew he was wrong. He hung up the receiver and walked around the corner to enter the convenience store. Two customers were dead on the floor, laying in contorted positions, their cell phones close to their twisted right hands. Our hero shuffled up to the closer body with his fists in his pockets and kicked the cell phone aside like a boy kicking a can. He stepped over the first body to the second one and crushed its cell phone with his heel, enjoying the crunch of its plastic parts. "What's for lunch?" he asked the clerk at the counter, who was still alive, gaping at the scene, immobile.

"Mister, we gotta call an a-a-ambulance," the clerk stuttered, suddenly knocking things from the counter in a mad scramble to turn up a phone. Then he remembered he had one in his hip pocket. He pulled it out and struggled to flip open the faceplate with a sweating hand. He wiped his palm across the chest of his white shirt, touching the corner of his pocket, where a thin patch

bore his first name. He looked down at it for a second, as if to remind himself who he was.

"Don't," said our hero, reaching for the phone. But the clerk stepped back from the counter suspiciously. Out of reach of our hero, steadily eyeing him, the clerk opened the phone and pressed his thumb against the glass, presumably thinking of the police. Our hero watched him put the phone against his ear. He watched him listen tensely to the ringing. The men never broke eye contact. Nor did they move. The ringing continued until someone picked up. But someone is the wrong word. Not someone, something. It picked up and the clerk's eyes nearly popped from his head. A second later he was lying on the floor behind the counter, his chin bent backward across the floor, a terrible grimace on his face. Our hero stood blinking, amazed by the speed and efficiency. He shook his head. He reached for a bright red rack beside the counter and secured a bag of chips.

Outside the store our hero ate the chips leisurely, plucking each one from the bag and holding it in his hand until the previous one was finished, crumbs and all, and his mouth was utterly empty. He popped the next chip between his teeth whole and crunched it with great involvement. Meanwhile, he looked out across the parking lot to the road, where two cars collided. The impact was not enough to seriously injure the drivers, but no one got out afterwards. The only visible body was slumped over the steering wheel. Our hero said, "You shouldn't gab while you're driving," and walked along.

He noticed a house with the door open. He walked up the steps and went in. There was a teenage girl on the couch, dead. The TV was on, playing the high squeal and colored bands on an Emergency broadcast. This interruption went on for over a minute and gave way to a newflash. Our hero walked to the couch and shifted the teenager's legs to the floor. He sat down beside her and closed her phone, depositing it on her lap. Her head hung at a strained angle. Her mouth was open, as if soon to speak.

The newflash indicated a national emergency involving the cell phone system. The reporter repeated many times, with deep seriousness, that no one was to use their cell phones until the government said otherwise. It seemed like a hoax, but our hero knew it was true. He knew other people would question it and many wouldn't listen. Or taking it seriously, they'd be that much more compelled to use their cell phones to call their loved ones and make sure they were all right. It was an interesting catch-22, finally working in our hero's favor instead of against him. He imagined the staggering lines that would form, that were forming, at the few remaining pay phones in the world, how people were scouring their neighborhoods to find one. He fingered the remaining change in his pocket, as if counting scant survivors.