

Phone Grid

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Word Count: 1543

And the slightly-crumpled page A2 of yesterday's newspaper flew by: "Man Charged with Murder; Used Remote as Weapon". It caught on a trash can, nearly to its appropriate destination; but a draft of wind from the under-the-trash-can sewer opening caught it, the page from the newspaper opening wide as if just released from Promethean bounds, the page attached to gusts of air, no longer bound by the laws of terrestrial physics.

Johannes saw this; it didn't cause a single emotion. Not that of wonder, at seeing something simple but yet beautiful; not that of disgust, at witnessing first-hand the decrepit nature of the city; not that of indifference, of not giving a damn about some piece of paper swirling in the air. There was nothing. At other times, Johannes wondered if perhaps it was "Nothing" with a capital "N".

"A spare battery for the homeless? A spare battery for the homeless?"

Johannes had one battery that he was going to throw away anyway. He threw it in the direction of the man, not venturing too close in fear of singeing his nostrils with the man's probable stench.

"Oh, thank you kind sir! Thank you!" the homeless man said. He fiddled with his phone, an archaic term that didn't even begin to describe the power or usefulness of the device, and pushed the battery into its slot. The small screen with its still-vibrant color cast a glow on the man's face. His expression

changed: no longer the craggy expression of a man who has seen too much sorrow, the eyes showed the delight of a child. Johannes knew the man's enjoyment would be short lived: the battery would probably die in a few minutes of use, and then who knows what. Johannes didn't have the money to spend on good ones, so it's entirely possible this one might burn up. Or explode. That had happened before.

"May the gods of tech bring you good fortune!"

"There are no gods," Johannes said. But not wanting to offend the man, for some reason, he added: "At least I don't think so."

In the depths of the city, that is, on the ground, the once-gleaming white plastic trash containers formed a wall between the sidewalk and the street; only tall men could see over their top. City issue, they lined up in military precision. Their exteriors were now grimy; a simple wash would at least make them not look so depressing, but what's the point? They were filled to the top; the newspaper was not alone in being carried in the wind, as loose papers at the top of the bins were continually fluttering away.

Johannes considered these walks, outside during a time of day when most people were asleep, or too afraid to leave their rooms, as aimless. Of course they weren't entirely aimless, because more often than not, they returned him to his apartment. Those other times he usually woke up somewhere he didn't know.

Rare was the sight of another person who was on the street at night. But yet Johannes didn't think his eyes were deceiving him when he saw a person at the end of the block ahead. A woman, most likely, determined by her clothes and the way she walked.

Johannes quickened his footsteps.

The woman, without looking back, could tell. She quickened hers. Johannes started to get a better look at her. Green full-length coat made of felt. Crimson red hair, the color most likely from a bottle, shortly cut and following the contours of her head exactly. The back of the coat had two blue pieces of felt attached near the . Johannes wasn't entirely sure, but he thought they looked like angel's wings, like those you might see on a Halloween costume.

She stopped. She slowly turned around to face Johannes. She asked: "Why are you following me?"

Taken aback, he said without thinking: "Because I wanted to see what you looked like."

She had clutched in her hand a blue phone switched off.

Her face was only slightly more elliptical than round. The mouth: as wide as her nose, no wider. Her nose: not abnormally large, not abnormally small. Deep eyes, black-brown, mostly hidden in the recesses of her sockets. A high forehead gave weight to the upper part of her face.

And for some reason Johannes couldn't keep his eyes off her.

“Well then, you’ve seen what I look like, now come along!”

He complied, and they started together lockstep. He contributed this lack of thought on his own part to his newly-intoxicated state.

“Why are you out here at this time of night?” he asked. “I’d be afraid if I were you.”

“I have a job to do,” she said.

“And what’s that?”

“If you want to find out, you’ll follow me.”

Inebriated, but in a way without alcohol, he complied yet again. There was something that he couldn’t understand pushing him forward.

“Why are you carrying that phone but not using it?” Johannes asked.

“Because I want to save it,” the girl said. And as if this were the beginning of the conversation, she said,

“And by the way, my name is Rachæl.”

“Johannes.” He reached out to shake her hand but she yanked her hands away from his attempted

grasp, as if she were afraid he would take the phone.

“Don’t *ever* do that again,” she said.

A few blocks ahead Johannes saw light from an apartment building, the only one on the street.

“Do you believe in the gods?” Rachael asked.

“Not really,” Johannes said. “You’re not one of those missionaries, are you?”

“I’m a different type: I don’t tell, I show.”

“But I get the feeling that you’re all the same. ‘The world is going to hell, put your faith in the gods and you will be saved.’ Bullshit.”

“The world *is* going to hell,” Rachael said. “But the gods still want you to enjoy life and be amazed by it.”

“What? That doesn’t sound like any religion I know.”

“What you don’t seem to understand is that simple things still matter. So the world as a whole is going to hell; that doesn’t mean that there aren’t still wonderful things out there.”

Johannes was confused but was perhaps, in some small way, beginning to believe Rachael might have a point.

“We’re heading to that apartment up ahead,” Rachael said. “The one with the light.”

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There were seven steps from the sidewalk to the door. The light at this point was blinding. Everything in front of Johannes was light pouring from behind the glass door. Rachael, in front of him, opened the door and stood out of Johannes’ way so he could enter first. Unable to keep his eyes open, he used his left arm to shield them and held his right arm straight in front to navigate. A door like those leading to a kitchen in a restaurant. No resistance, it opened easily into no light.

And he found himself in a large room, formerly a ballroom, perhaps. Wood floor scuffed from years of trampling shoes. The requisite chandelier gone. A few people in the center. And on the far wall, a grid that stretched from floor to ceiling. At each point in the grid, a phone. Most were old models from years past, much beyond any use. Batteries from them didn’t even exist anymore.

Johannes counted a row and a column and tried to remember his multiplication tables. Twenty rows and twenty columns makes four hundred phones. And where the battery would go, wires instead. The wires formed the connections between the individual phones and provided the horizontal and vertical lines of the grid.

But one point was empty. At the bottom right corner was a pair of unattached wires. He felt the breeze of Rachael's quick passing-by as she went towards the far wall. The crowd, along with Johannes, had their eyes fixed on her. A little fiddling with the wires and then she turned around to face the center of the room.

"We save things from death. We organize the chaotic. We bring light to the dark. We bring happiness to the sad."

She inserted the phone into the slot and attached the wires to the battery terminal. And she stepped back.

One by one each screen came alive, starting from the top right. Some were so old as to be in greyscale, some in color. Text then flowed from top to bottom of the screens, moving seamlessly from one phone to the next. Then an image, a photo taken with the built-in camera and stored inside for gods know how long. Sounds came out of the speakers of the phones and created a mixture that wasn't a cacophony; rather, it felt as if you were taking part in four hundred lives at once.

From the back of the room Johannes walked towards the group in the center and sat down. Rachael came and sat down beside him. As Johannes looked at her face he could see that she was smiling. Johannes fixated again on the grid in the front of the room; his expression became one of delight like that of a child.