

# Cellphone Girl (Part I)

by Paul Vigna

Anna's cellphone woke her up. A little mechanized version of a currently popular song - one that received no airplay on commercial radio stations but had become a massive viral hit on the web - droned on incessantly inside her head. She opened her eyes, looked around her spinning bedroom. The pastels in the room didn't alleviate the pain at all. Her head hurt, pay back for last night's cocktails. The phone wasn't on her nightstand. It wasn't on her dresser. She wasn't sure, in fact, where it was.

"Oh, God," she groaned. She rolled over and pulled a pillow over her head. "Where's the phone?" The synthesized ringtone stopped playing.

"Anna?" Anna heard a voice say. She recognized the voice.

"Jen?"

"Hey, what's up? How you feeling? You talk to Ben yet?" Anna bolted up, looked around. Jen wasn't in the room. Nobody was. And yet, she could hear Jen. It could be a dream, but she didn't feel like she was dreaming. She felt like she was hung over.

"Jen, where are you?"

"In my kitchen. Why?" Anna was fairly sure she wasn't sleeping. And she was completely sure she wasn't in Jen's kitchen.

"How are you talking to me?" Anna asked. Maybe she was sleeping.

"The phone. Ever hear of it? You hung over?"

"Must be," Anna mumbled.

"Well, call me back when you wake up. I wanna hear about Ben." The disembodied voice of her friend disappeared. The pain in Anna's head grew sharper; her eyes burned. The events of last night materialized in her mind: the club, the pink lady's, Ben and his inscrutable immaturity, the pink lady's. How many had she had? Many, judging by the pounding inside her skull.

Coffee, aspirin were requirements. She'd go out later and get a burger at the coffeeshop. Nothing cured hangovers better than

greasy hamburgers. She trudged into the other room, a tiny living room/dining room/kitchen, the last little more than an alcove with cabinets. She pulled out a filter, put it in the coffee maker. The coffee was in a mason jar on the counter. She blindly scooped out enough for several strong cups, added water, and turned on the machine. She felt feverish, and wondered briefly if she had a virus.

She was pretty, with long, straight black hair, sharp brown eyes and olive skin, one of the completely anonymous, attractive people filling the world, people who didn't have modeling contracts or TV shows, who weren't gossiped about in the press merely because they were attractive. She was just some girl.

Her cellphone rang. Again.

At first, she thought, the phone's ringing again. But it was a dream before, in her bedroom. The phone ringing now, in her living room/dining room/kitchen, meant it had to have been a dream earlier. But again, where was the phone? She looked around, but didn't see it.

"Where's the damn phone?" she said aloud.

"Anna?" Ben's voice called out her name.

"Ben?" She spun around, then around again, then again, like a dervish. Ben wasn't there; nobody was.

"Hey, babe, how you feeling?"

"Ben," Anna said slowly, carefully, "where are you?" Confusion was giving way to panic. She could hear him, clear as a bell. She could hear him *in her head*. His voice filled her head. But he wasn't anywhere in sight.

"I'm at my place. Wanna go get breakfast?"

"Ben, I have to go," she said. Now she really was freaking out. Where the hell was her cellphone? Why could she hear Ben? And Jen before that? That wasn't a dream? What the hell's going on?

"Is it about last night? Please, Anna, let's talk this over. Just, please, let's meet, let's talk," he said, hopeful.

"Ben, please hang up."

"I don't want to hang up, baby. I don't want to."

"Hang up the fucking phone, Ben!"

“Okay, okay. Please, call me later. We can work this out.”

“Fine.”

“Fine. Bye,” Ben said, hanging on the line, waiting for her to say something. She didn't say anything. “I love you.” He waited, hoping to hear a similar sentiment from Anna. “Fine,” he said again, and hung up. Anna stood in the middle of her living room/dining room/kitchen, frozen. She stood there for a full minute, thinking. She was awake, she was sure of that now. She had had two full-on conversations with people who called her cellphone, and in neither case did she make use of her cellphone. She could not explain that last fact. Like lightning, a thought flashed into her head that filled her with dread.

She had to find her phone before the next call.

Anna exploded into motion, rifling through her small apartment. She looked on the coffee table, on the end table. She overturned magazines, she overturned cushions. She looked in the kitchen. She looked in her closet. She opened the drawer on her nightstand. She flipped the sheets in a blur. They flew up in the air, filling the space above the bed, and silently, slowly floated back down. She couldn't find it, and she couldn't think straight to reason out where it was. Back in the living room/dining room/kitchen, she held her head in her hands. The headache was getting worse, she desperately wanted a cup of coffee. Where in God's name was the Goddamned phone? She saw her purse resting on a table by the front door. She grabbed it, turned it over and dumped the contents on the table. Her purse, pens, a change purse, lipstick, compact, loose change, an earring all spilled out and clattered onto the table and floor. The cellphone wasn't among the flotsam and jetsam.

Did she even have the thing anymore?

She threw open the closet door next to the front door, grabbed the coat she'd worn last night. There, in the side pocket, she found her cellphone and the earpiece she wore so often. The phone was on, as it usually was. She and Jen smiled up at her, a picture of them in a bar in Sao Paulo filling the phone's main screen. She turned it over. Nothing at all seemed out of place. The music started up

again, da, da-da, da, dum, dum, de, da da, da, dum dum. The screen flashed the words "Mom."

She held her breath. She couldn't talk to her mother, not right now. This was all too weird. The music kept rattling on, driving her up a wall. Oh please, oh please go away, she thought, terrified that even a thought could trigger the phone. Pressure built up in her lungs; she'd never been good at the holding your breath game. She let out a long breath, slowly, a little huff escaping her throat. The music stopped. She heard nothing for one second. Two seconds.

"Hello? Anna?" her mother's voice called out in her head. White-hot panic seized her, sheer terror. But she didn't dare utter a word. She stood there, holding the cellphone in her hand, terrified of it as if it was venomous.

"Anna?" her mother said again. *Please hang up, please hang up*, Anna thought. *Please please please*. Finally, she heard a muffled click, a disconnection. She couldn't even breath now? That would trigger it? She stared at the phone, what was she suddenly realized just an inert collection of wires in a little black plastic box. How could this be happening? Christ almighty, she thought.

"Call Jen," she said aloud. The phone blinked to life, Jen's number popped up on a screen. She heard the rapid-fire notes, each number being called up and triggered in sequence.

She heard all this in her head.

The doorbell rang.

"It's open," Anna said, curled up in a fetal position on her couch. Her phone had rang three more times since she called Jen: Ben again, her mother again and Liz. Anna had quickly gotten much better at the holding your breath game. Jen opened the door and walked into the living room/dining room/kitchen. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail and under a pink Yankees cap. She looked at her friend mournfully.

"And I thought I was hungover," she said. Anna sat up. She had the cellphone and earpiece in her hands.

"Here, take these," Anna said, handing them over. "Go into my bedroom, shut the door, and call my phone with your phone."

"What?"

"Just go and do it." Jen was confused, but took the equipment, stared at her friend, turned and went into the bedroom. She shut the door behind her. Anna sat there staring at the closed bedroom door, and she realized she'd never seen it closed from this side. Another new thing today. Half a minute later, the music started playing in her head.

"Hi," she said.

"You got another earpiece?"

"No."

"Well, what're you doing?"

"I don't know."

"Whatdya mean you don't know? You get a new phone?"

"No."

"Then how are you talking to me?"

"I don't know!" The bedroom door opened, and Jen came walking through, holding her own cellphone up to her ear. She looked very strangely at Anna.

"I told you you spend too much time on your phone."

By Monday, Anna had the situation pretty much figured out. Somehow, she could talk on her cellphone without actually using it. The calls were going through her as if her whole head had become a wireless receiver. She absolutely did not understand how or why that was happening, but the physical evidence was impossible to ignore.

She called the phone company, tried to explain the situation, but the woman at the call center scoffed, told her to stop playing pranks or the phone company would alert the authorities, and hung up. The next call was to her doctor. She told them she was suffering from a virus, and as they had an opening, saw her that day.

"You're going to think I'm crazy," she told Dr. Antinori, her feet dangling over the padded examining table, "but..." and she explained the whole thing to him.

"You're right, I think you're crazy," he said. But Anna insisted, and they recreated the experiment she'd done with Jen, this time with a nurse who took Anna's cellphone and earpiece, went out into the reception room, and called the phone. Anna heard the familiar tune in her head.

"It's me," she said, as Dr. Antinori stared curiously at her. "Yes, I can hear you now...no...no, he's just looking at me. Sure, come back in." The nurse did, wearing a puzzled look on her face.

"I heard her clearly," the nurse said. Dr. Antinori stared into space for a minute, trying to piece together the extraordinary event he'd just witnessed.

"Give me the phone," he said, "I want to try it."

There were x-rays. And MRIs. A visit to a neurologist, the best in the city. Dr. Antinori insisted. During these days, the phone calls kept coming into Anna's head, a fact she kept from everybody (save Jen), even her mother. If she was in public, she actually put the phone up to her ear - the earpiece had been long since relegated to a desk drawer - even though there wasn't any need to; in fact, it created an annoying echo that drove her to cut every conversation short.

The x-rays came back negative. The MRI came back negative. The city's best neurologist found nothing. It was, all agreed, an unusual and perplexing predicament.

"You're still getting the calls?" Dr. Antinori asked.

"Yes," Anna said.

"To your head?"

"To my head."

"Well, we're stumped. There's absolutely nothing wrong with you."

"So what do I do now?"

"Call the phone company."

“I tried them already.”

Cindy Regan, the receptionist at the neurologist's office, told her best friend Anouri about the unusual case of Anna's cellphone. Most people, when they're told a story that comes with the “don't tell anybody” condition, figure they can tell at least one person, and even medical professionals can sometimes forget their responsibilities when confronted with such an unusual case.

The neurologist, for instance, told his wife. The nurse in Dr. Antinori's office told her best friend. Anouri repeated the story to her boyfriend, Dominick. Dominick maintained the blog writeomat, and he immediately wrote a post about the girl who went to see the neurologist with the sterling reputation, about the phone calls she was receiving in her head. This, then, is how information travels in the age of the web.

“Hi, I'd like to order a land line,” Anna said to the phone rep. They went through the script, and toward the end Anna, feeling perhaps she'd established sufficient rapport, started to explain the strange case of her cellphone.

“Maybe you've got a virus.”

“Your phone is the virus.”

“Lady, we don't have time for pranks,” the rep said, momentarily diverted from her script. “If you need any further assistance, call our one-eight-hundred number.”

“I'm not kidding!” Anna yelled.

“We have your number. One more call, and we'll prosecute. Have a nice day,” the rep said.

“Wait, can I still get the land line?” Anna said, but the line was dead.

The rep, Kishori, sitting in a white-walled cubicle in an office in an office park in Mumbai, India, stood up and looked over the half-wall to the next cubby. Her good friend, Pramesh, sat at his desk in the middle of a call. Kishori waited patiently for him to finish his script, then hang up.

“Wait until you hear this,” Kishori said in her native Indian accent, falling out of the American one she used on the phone she'd worked hard to perfect. “This crazy American girl was saying the calls are coming into her head.”

“Like aliens are calling her?”

“I don't know. But that's going on the blog,” Kishori said. “I'll call her Cellphone Girl.” And soon, very soon, Anna's frustrating problem was known to a ragged spider-web of people on two continents. But rather than a single spider spinning the web, a beehive's worth of spiders were spinning it. Anna was about to go viral.

Her attempt to contact the phone company using her phone to explain the problem with her phone rebuffed, Anna took the next step: visiting the phone company's monolithic headquarters building downtown.

“I demand to speak with someone in authority,” she barked to the receptionist in the expansive lobby. It was the kind of request that so flummoxed the receptionist that she corralled somebody in authority. Mr. Andrew Tyler was none too pleased when Anna pleaded her case and performed her trick. He was an executive, for God's sake, or soon to be one.

“Lady, get the hell outta here before I call a cop,” he said. Anna protested, then skulked out. It was ridiculous the stuff Tyler still had to put up with before his next promotion came through. Although he had to admit to himself he couldn't quite figure out how the girl pulled off the stunt.

She skulked out of the monolithic phone company headquarters building, down the steps and through the bustling crowd making their way through the crowded, gray city. A businessman brushed by her, barely aware of her as he barked into his cellphone. She passed another person on their phone. And another. So many, she realized. And music players, the ear buds jammed in their ears. They moved past her without even a look in her direction, hundreds



of people among thousands, among millions, wandering around with machines plugged into their heads. None of them had a clue.

