Cellphone Girl (Part II)

by Paul Vigna

Anna sat on her couch, watching her favorite reality show, “America's Tired of You,” which featured B-list, C-list and Z-list celebrities in a talent show. The losers were booted off the show, and had to agree to never again seek the limelight. Anna's money was on Joey Buttafuoco, but she had to admit, Kevin Federline had a good shot at winning the whole thing, and by winning, totally lose.

A hard knock at her door jolted her. The stranger rapped three more times.

“Who is it?” Anna yelled, annoyed by the intrusion.

“It's Ben.”

“Oh, hell.” She went to the door, unfastened the three locks, and opened the door. Ben stood there, a look of surprise on his face. “You were expecting Beyonce?” she said.

“What the hell, Anna,” he said. “What the hell? I've been calling you for two weeks.”

“I've got a problem with my phone.”

“Really?” he said in a tone that made it clear he didn't buy that.

“Really. Look, come in.” Ben was familiar with the apartment, and quickly made himself at home on the sofa. Anna sat down next to him.

“I've got some things I need to say,” he said.

“Look, I'm sorry I didn't call you back.”

“Just, just let me get this out.” Ben had a real “I have seen the Promised Land,” tragic tone in his voice. “I know that I hurt you. I was wrong, and I apologize. But I didn't know where we stood, and you kept shifting the ground, and now you won't even return my calls.”

“I'm having a cell phone problem,” Anna said.

“You know, Anna, at least come up with a good lie...”

“It's not a lie.”

“...say you've swine flu, or some virus, or something...”

“It's not a lie!”

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“...cancer, I don't know.” Anna stood up, went to her side table and got her cell phone out of a drawer.

“Here,” she said. “Wait!” She went and retrieved the earpiece. “Take this, too. Go into my bedroom and call me on your phone.”

“What?”

“Just do it.”

“You want me to call this phone,” he held up her cell phone, “on my phone?”

“Yes.” He got up and walked in her bedroom, staring curiously at her. A moment later, she heard the ringtone in her head.

“Hey,” she said. “This is me talking to you.” The bedroom door opened and he came out, the curious look replaced by an annoyed one.

“You don't have to play stupid games, Anna.”

“Ugh! It's not a stupid game you idiot,” she screamed. She marched over to him. “Look at me, look, look in my ears. See anything?”

“No,” he said in a slow drawl, examining her ears.

“Stand there and call me,” she said, and walked to the other side of the room. “Do it.” Ben stared at her. He just couldn't understand where this was going. Her head was a cell phone now? This is why they were breaking up? “Women,” he muttered and dialed. He heard the ring. Once. Twice.

“Well?” he said.

“Hello,” Anna said. Ben heard her say it in the room, and he also clearly heard her voice through the speaker of his phone. He stared at her again.

“How'd you do that?”

“I have no idea, I just know I can do it.” He was watching her talk from across the room, and hearing her in the cellphone; he still didn't believe it, but he was finding it harder to deny what he was seeing.

“I honestly have no idea what's going on. The doctors don't know, the phone company won't listen to me. All I know is I can do this.”

And so it was that Ben came to believe however loosely Anna's story about being able to receive phone calls through her head. He didn't understand it, but he didn't think she was putting him on, either. The story stuck in his head, this story of Anna's and her head, and it was still in his head when at a corner bar he ran into his friend Steve, who maintained the blog Superfluous Rot. Over beers, Ben told Steve the odd story of his strained relationship with his girlfriend, who he now suspected was going quite insane, because somehow her cell phone calls were being beamed directly into her head. And that's how the vague story floating around of a girl who received phone calls directly into her head got a name attached to it.

That's when Anna's life got really weird.

The tsunami started, ironically enough, with a phone call.

Anna stood in her kitchen (well, in her kitchen nook) over the stove, mixing a pot of rice, beans, pork, chop meat and chili. It was a recipe her grandmother had given her.

“No, I haven't talked to him in weeks. It's better off that way, too,” she said, speaking into air.

“Well,” Jen said, the words flowing through Anna's head, “it's his own damn fault.” Anna heard the familiar beep that signaled another call. She'd become quite comfortable with the idea of the calls coming into her head. Somewhere else inside her head she vaguely feared that it was dangerous. But it was also kind of fun, actually.

“I've got another call,” she said.

“Who is it?”

“Don't know, phone's across the room.” And that's where it would stay until after Anna ate, after she cleaned the dishes, after she sat down to watch America's Tired of You. She'd figured it was either Ben, work or her mother, who remained extremely worried about her daughter's condition and was working frantically to enlist the phone company's help. She picked up the phone and dialed into her messages. The voice was immediately unfamiliar.

“I'm calling for Anna,” the voice said. “My name's Ed Hilla and I'm a reported for USAToday. I'd like to talk to you about your cellphone problem.” That's random, she thought.

It seemed random only because it was the first.

“You have...” the electronic voice of the message service said, “...11 new messages.”

“Hi, I'm Rob Cardiff from the LA Times...”

“...Cnet...”

“Hello, I'm Leslie Bruce, from the Miami Herald...”

“Ms. Rodriguez, I'm Ed Lin from the Daily News...”

“...techcrunch...”

“...CNN...”

“...I'm from the New York Times...”

“...ABC-TV New York...”

“...the Chicago Tribune...”

“...the Atlanta Journal-Constitution...”

“...QED Boston...”

“...ars technica...”

A white-hot chill ran down Anna's spine and spread across her body. There were dozens of messages. She ran over to her PC and with the press of a button the machine whirred to life and the monitor flashed brightly. She sat, waited impatiently for the thing to power up, sweat pouring out of her. The familiar ringtone broke the silence. At the first notes, she jumped up and grabbed the cellphone off the coffee table.

“Shit!” she screamed, and threw the phone, hard as possible, against the wall. It smashed to pieces. She sat back at the computer, opened a web browser, and googled her own name. There were news stories, blog posts, message board comments; her name, her condition, her high-school yearbook picture. Page after page of them, everybody talking about her. There it was, her whole life, practically. All the pertinent details: her birthplace, hometown, high school, college (not completed, they had to go and note that), her employer, an injury she suffered one year in summer camp. How they got that one she had no idea. It all read like an obituary.

They called her Cellphone Girl.

She ordered a pizza from the place around the corner, the same thing she always did. She'd eat a few slices and wrap the rest in tin foil. The place was too close to justify having it delivered, so without thinking about it, she did what she always did: ordered it for pick-up.

Anna walked out of the front door of her apartment building, and immediately noticed the crowd. They, at first, didn't notice her; maybe a dozen of them: photographers, cameramen, reporters. One stood smoking a cigarette, two were engaged in a heated debate, one sat on a car hood, another on the pavement, writing in her notepad. They were journalists, although they didn't look like A-list ones. Of course, Anna wasn't an A-list celebrity either.

But she caught the double-takes, the recognition in their eyes. They tossed their butts, picked up their cameras and video cameras and microphones and descended on her, slowly but surely, as if they knew she had nowhere to run.

“Anna, how long have the calls been coming into your head?”

“Does it hurt?”

“Does your head get wi-fi?”

“Will you patent your head?”

“Will you start your own phone company?” She stood there, a deer in the headlights, not knowing whether to run back inside. She'd had no idea the press would doorstep her. She didn't even know what doorstepping was. But there wasn't any point in going back inside now. They were here, they knew she was here.

“It doesn't hurt,” she said, shyly. “It's a little scary, but it doesn't hurt.” She smiled, a nervous smile. The photographers snapped some shots, tiny electric motors shirring quietly. “Nobody can find anything wrong with me, but everybody knows this isn't normal.” The reporters scribbled in their notebooks as she unwittingly delivered the money quote, the pull quote. The small scrabble waited for anything she said, anything she did, they were totally focused on her.

It was actually kinda cool, she thought to herself.

Andrew Tyler sat among a dozen or so executives in a conference room, one wall glass-lined and exposed to the office, the other filled with windows looking out into the concrete and steel city. He didn't dare divulge the fact that he'd actually met her; he'd just been promoted, for Christ sake, how would it look?

“She's gonna be on ‘Jane,'” one executive said.

“Who the hell's Jane?” another asked.

“You know, that exercise chick with the big tits. They gave her a talk show.”

“We have to get to this girl,” a third offered, an ad man.

“Jane?”

“Not Jane, you idiot. The girl. The cellphone girl. She's pretty hot. Make a great spokesman.”

“What if she's pissed at us? What if we really made her sick?” Tyler said.

“We didn't make her sick. She's probably just got a virus or something.”

“What if the signals really did fry her brain?” he said again; guilt tugged at him.

“Can you patent a human being?”

“Are you insane?”

“I'm just asking a question.”

“Let's get legal on it.”

“What if she sues us out of existence?”

“Nobody gets sued out of existence anymore. That's why we have lawyers and lobbyists.”

“Really, what if she's got like brain cancer?”

“They'll never tag that on us. Lots of things cause brain cancer.”

“Where's the stock?”

“Down sixty bips. Street doesn't care.”

“I'm not kidding, can we patent her? I mean, this could be a great new product, if it's not causing brain cancer. Calls right into your head. Don't think the Japanese aren't working on this.”

Studio 7B was smaller and cheaper than it looked on TV. The audience was a small, tightly seated group in cheaply constructed bleachers. Dozens of lights hung in rows from support beams up in the rafters. Anna sat in a plush chair on the bare stage, and those lights, their physical existence, seemed so odd to her; in her mind, the space above the stage was occupied by a plant.

"So did you just think, like, *I'm going crazy*!" Jane said, doing a vague imitation of Kermit the Frog at the end. America discovered Jane when the personal trainer started a cable exercise show. Her signature phrase was "Let's go!" and the success of such a trifle was testament to the power of repetition. She had the ability, no matter what manner of pretzel-like contortion she got her body into, to maintain an alarmingly engaging smile and keep shouting encouragement to her TV audience; after countless thousands of jumping jacks, leg bends and crunches, always delivering her signature line as energetically as the first time she'd ever said it, somebody, somewhere, decided Jane's bubbly personality, blinding white smile and endless reserve of energy would make her a perfect morning talk-show host.

"I don't know what's crazier," Anna said, "what's happened to me with the cellphone, or everything that's happened since."

In that first meeting with the paps, way back when outside Anna's apartment, one thing was obvious: the proverbial camera loved her. "Hey, you've got a nice smile," one of the photographers said. "Give us a smile."

For weeks she'd been living in an internal panic over her condition, a panic that grew exponentially when she realized she was a news story. But the camera couldn't see her condition, it saw only Anna, and her pretty white smile. Tomorrow it would be some bubble boy, or disgraced Senator, or plucky, unlikely hero. Today it was Anna. She felt like a child at a birthday party, encouraged to smile for her father, make a wish and blow out the candles. She was the center of attention, all eyes on her, everybody taking her

picture. This is what it felt like, then, to be a star. It was just like a little child's birthday party.

“And the phone company,” Jane said sternly, “wouldn't even take your calls.”

“Nope,” Anna said. “They didn't want nothing to do with me.” She looked out at the lights, the crowd, all of this energy and spectacle trained on her. It really got her adrenaline going. She saw the camera with the red light on it, she looked right into its black, unblinking, convex eye. “Well,” she said, spreading her arms wide, as if to say, look at me now, look at where I am, “can you *hear me NOW?!*” The crowd roared its approval. Jane nodded approvingly. She pointed at the camera.

“We'll be back after this,” Jane said, all warmth, all smile, her look and cadence begging the viewer to watch the commercials, please, please watch them, buy the products advertised, and stay tuned.

“And we're out,” Anna heard somebody bark.

“Boy, I'll tell you,” Jane said to Anna, the warmth replaced by weariness. “You really lucked out with this cellphone thing.” A small army of stylists descended on the two women, reapplying this, adjusting that. “It took me years to get famous.”

“I guess,” Anna said. The hairdresser picked at Anna's hair with a comb. Abruptly, she heard the sounds of a ringtone; not her own. Her own phone wasn't even on. The hairdresser looked at Anna's head, decided she'd done enough, stuck the comb away and pulled a cellphone out of her pocket.

“Hi, honey,” she said.

“I've got a baby running around with no diaper on, I can't find the fucking Desitin and there's urine everywhere.” The voice filled Anna's head, this male voice she'd never heard before. “When are you coming home?” The hairdresser smiled at Anna and walked away. She whispered into the phone, but Anna heard it all clear as day.

“I told you, I'm working. He's 14 months old, you can't handle a 14-month old? Just change the Goddamned diaper.”

“I can't do this. You have to come home.”

“When you get a job, I'll come home.” Anna heard all this in her head, and it took her a second to realize she was hearing *other* people, one halfway across the city, on their phones. That white-hot panic seized her again, just as it had that first morning.

“Oh dear God,” she said aloud.