

## The Loudest Voice in the World

A band of light torques around her finger and then it drops. The rest flows down from her head and out in all directions—a messy, not-quite halo, hanging far too low, obscuring her otherworldly face.

Elmer's gotten used to this—everything looking strange—but the black teeth still get to him. Eventually, he could adjust to that as well, if only the distortions were to remain consistent. But they don't. The colors are inverted—a film negative. Then they aren't. Everything is right-side up. Then it's upside down. Elmer would have the implant taken out if he could, but there's no one around to do it, not since Doc died. Even if there were, who would dare? The nerves and nano-wires had become so tightly enmeshed that trying to separate them without the benefit of a 3D microscope would leave Elmer blind, if not dead.

But if the 3D microscopes worked, his implant probably would as well: They were all roasted at the same time.

The man starts speaking. Elmer shifts his gaze. It's impossible to guess the man's age, at least through the inversion. Elmer notices the accent.

“We don't have any money. We know we owe you . . .”

*Vietnamese?* Elmer can't tell. He scowls, but he's not certain of how obvious it is.

“I have no time for this,” *cough*, “pay your bills.”

“We don't have any money.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time.” Elmer looks around, leans back in the disintegrating recliner and pats his field jacket. *Where in Satan's name did I put that cigar?* And *that* is his primary concern. He doesn't need to listen to the spiel. He's heard it all before.

“Certainly, we can offer you something.” The man sounds vaguely solicitous. Elmer glances past him, at the girl. She's playing with her hair

—self-soothing, Elmer guesses—shifting uncomfortably in her chair. *Yep, that’s about right. When the times get tough, the people get pimping.*

“And what would I do with her?”

The man, probably the father, looks perplexed. But it’s a valid question. The obvious thing to do with a girl isn’t all that obvious once you’ve hit your seventies, and that mile marker shrunk away to nothing in Elmer’s rear-view mirror long ago. An invisible bulb illuminates over the man’s head. It’d be inverted too, if only Elmer could see it.

“She can cook!”

“Everybody says that,” *snort*, “Everybody lies!”

And they did. Payment in people, usually girls and women, had gotten surprisingly common over the past year. Your son could join a militia (pronounced: *gang*). Or you could send him out in search of the *City of Light*—not the one with outdoor cafes and streets covered in dog shit. That city was ruined, all but empty, and completely dark, with the last message heard from there being a suicide note, broadcast to no one in particular—but some mythical place; a city always just beyond the horizon; an island nation-state; or even a converted oil tanker, retrofitted to allow billionaires to ride out the collapse of the modern world in comfort, where the grid worked and where Faraday cages, as far as the eye could see, had protected all the valuable technology.

It’s all nonsense. There is no city. The militias are useless messes. Nobody prepared, which is a pity. They could have. To the extent that anyone can be certain of anything, Elmer knows that the City and the saving power of the militias are pipe dreams. You were sending your son to his death. *Oh well*. And nobody knows how to fix anything. That makes life worse.

Well, *almost nobody* knows how to fix anything. Only a few of the most crotchety, caustic, and usually half-blind near-corpses know how to breathe life back into the machines. And those who do, find themselves in high demand. Hence:

“Do you know what happened to the last girl?” Elmer smiles sinisterly. The man shrugs. “Ate her!”

This is a lie. Elmer’s garden is doing better than he had hoped it would, and since he started canning again, there’s no shortage of vegetables, even in the dead of winter. The corn crop—nearly ready for harvest—is likely to be fair to middling, but the potatoes are coming along nicely. The idea of dining on a *booze-fed land whale* is nauseating, and what would be the point? The pond is well stocked, and the bass and bluegill almost certainly have fewer heavy metals in them than does human flesh. *The truth*—the truth is that the last woman ran away when she realized that the only time anyone got *hot and sweaty* on Elmer’s farm was when digging a drainage ditch. And *many* ditches need digging. Elmer wants work, not affection, and he doesn’t trust anyone who offers him the latter.

He always gets a kick out of the cannibalism shtick. He started the horror-house myth as a way of discouraging people from dumping strays on him (of either the two- or four-legged varieties). It seems to be effective: An amazing number of people appear to believe him.

They shouldn’t.

The man is resigned. He’s given up. The men who come begging usually do. They know a stubborn old jackass when they’ve met one.

Someone clears her throat, far too loudly, and up stands a woman, probably middle aged (but again, judging age from a negative image isn’t easy for Elmer). She’s short, sturdy, and dark enough to look as though she just plodded out of a rice paddy.

“But she really can cook. I swear! I taught her myself!” There’s obvious pride in the last sentence, enough to intrigue Elmer.

“Oh really?” He lets the words fade away and die. “What?”

The woman turns around and barks something incomprehensible at the girl in the corner, who’s still nervously fiddling with her hair and staring at the floor, in tones so harsh that Elmer nearly snaps to attention. He has to resist answering with a *Sir, yes, sir!*

The girl opens her overstuffed backpack, produces a collapsible fishing rod and toy-sized tackle box, and scurries out the door. *This is new.*

“What’s she doing?” Elmer nods towards the door, not taking his eyes off the woman. She’s no longer in chromatic reverse, but she’s upside down. *And such is why I stay off the road*—It doesn’t matter that Elmer has the only truck for miles around that works. He looks her over, bottom to top. The woman isn’t old—45 at worst. And her clothing is well-mended, which makes her stand out all the more in a world dressed in rags. *Maybe she did teach the girl something.*

“You watch! She’ll catch your dinner, and she’ll fry it too. All you have to do is take it easy, *old man!*” She snarls. Elmer snarls back.

“And what do you want in exchange for this oh-so-practical child of yours, *honey?*” There’s no point in talking to the man. Elmer can see who runs the show.

“Forgive our debts! All of them!”

Elmer nods, but has a sneaking suspicion she’s not . . .

“And free fish! You let the girl catch enough fish for us too.”

Elmer and the woman eyeball each other, waiting for the other to blink. Elmer spots his cigar on the edge of the old, gray, government-surplus desk. *That’s where I left it!* He picks the cigar up, nonchalantly, before swirling it around his mouth. Elmer begins to pat himself down for a second time. *Where did I put that . . .*

*Snap! Snap!*

A spark and then a flame appear before Elmer in quick succession. He leans forward and lights his cigar. The woman smiles down on him before clicking closed the lid, and dropping a Venetian slimline Zippo back into her pocket. Elmer is impressed. The woman—the mother, presumably—was halfway across the room seconds ago—and she must have made the leap while Elmer was looking down, and silently. And not that many women could snap start a lighter anyway. *Hmm.* He takes a contemplative drag.

“We’ll see how dinner goes.” Elmer does his best to sound impassive.

The woman’s smile becomes a faint smirk.

She knows she’s already won.

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I wish Mom had let me pack the other tent. This one is too small, and I can never get the folds quite right. The angles are off, never aligned, and the fabric makes a harsh noise when I brush my fingers across it. But the other tent is Little Brother’s, and she won’t let me move anything of his. I don’t blame her. *A place for every thing, and every thing in its place.* But Mom is not that careful about anything else. She’s moved other things since the big green waves rolled across the sky and made all the machines go dark.

I don’t like it—everything being moved. The house is messy, and I’ve lost track of all the little objects. The numbers keep getting smaller. Mom sells things. I don’t know why. We didn’t have too many, and I could keep count of what we did.

The lights were pretty. You could even see them during the day. The bright waves, mainly green but flecked with a little red, flowed from north to south, and fainter ones moved up from south to north. They met in the middle, lapping over each other, but they didn’t make any noise. They didn’t crash into each other, not like water. I liked that.

Then sparks flew off the electric lines, and things started burning. There wasn’t any water from the pipes and faucets. I didn’t like that.

Mom wants me to cook. She says it’s the only thing I can do well right now. That and music. I remember 183 recipes. I have all the spices I need, but I don’t know what I’ll do when I run out of them. The man doesn’t say anything about the food. It must be okay. Mom tells me I’ll need to learn more things eventually.

I wish Mom had let me pack the other tent. I don’t like the way this one smells. At least everything in here is quiet.

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*Khiem—Kim*, as pronounced by Elmer—is an odd duck. Not foreigner odd—she didn't sound foreign when she spoke (which was not often) and Elmer guesses that she was raised in the States. She's *odd odd*—no eye contact, flat voice, keeps counting spoons. Maybe she's just terrified. People do strange things when they're afraid. But that doesn't explain the tent she set up in her room. *Maybe she just wants her privacy*. Or she thinks Elmer will be tempted to try something sinister if he sees her in a state of partial undress. On a different farm, her fears might be justified.

Regardless of her reasons, this stray isn't getting too friendly. The ones who did usually stole something. And she was a good cook. Amazingly so.

*Anyway . . .*

Elmer turns to the radio, a mess of wires and components he managed to find by scouring every abandoned house, every junkyard, and every partially gutted electronics supply house in four counties, soldered together with a finicky butane iron and crammed into a steel box. There are two directional antennas outside—Yagis cobbled together from scrap metal—aimed towards New York and California, respectively, and driven by an array of Sovtek vacuum tubes stolen (*er . . . liberated*) from a music store's worth of guitar amplifiers.

Most of the gear is junk, really—everything except for the Vibroplex key—his money machine. Morse code is the only thing that works anymore. Everybody on the great net in the sky—a different sort of *Skynet*—can use it. Putting together a functional single-sideband transceiver would have been a challenge, with the resulting voice transmissions cutting through the noise of time and space far less effectively than Morse. And the duty cycles for AM and FM would have been too high for the pathetic equipment that formed the backbone of the new information dirt road. The generator is crap too, but it's carbureted, which is the only reason it runs.

So Elmer powers up the machine. The tubes will need a few minutes to warm—just enough time for him to brew himself another pot of coffee, sharpen a few fresh pencils, and prepare himself for a solid eight hours of receiving and relaying messages from one coast to the other, and a few more sending out messages from locals to far-away friends and relatives. Occasionally, the senders got word back. But not often. The better part of the population seems to have disappeared into the void, unreachable by even the most determined operators.

How many people even know about the operators and about their relay network is up for debate. And not many people (operators or citizens) stayed at their city addresses for long—no food, no water, no fire control, no fun. A veil of ignorance had fallen across the world, and humanity was nearly back where it started. Information is cheap, until it becomes expensive. And then it's priceless.

Which is why Elmer's rates, no matter how absurd they might have seemed in the era before the storm, are entirely reasonable now. So Elmer is one of the richest men in town.

He considers asking Kim to fire up the stove again—about the only thing he *hadn't* hated about Vietnam was the food and drink, the coffee in particular—and given her weirdly encyclopedic knowledge of the culinary arts, she would almost certainly know how to make a cup better than could Elmer. But she's already retreated to her tent, and that deer-in-the-headlights look she keeps giving him is more than a little off-putting.

Elmer adjusts the hot incandescent lamp at his desk, pulling the light down to a tight cone over his notepad, leaving all the grimy wood paneling and war trophies of the office in near darkness—each and every photon is precious. He needs all of them he can get at his age. Elmer's eyes reset again. One is inverting colors, and the other is reversing the image—like looking in a mirror. *Great, just great!* He reaches for an eye patch. He hesitates. Elmer isn't certain of which eye is going to prove to be a bigger pain in the ass.

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Phan Phat Trinh—*Louis* to the other guys in the band—and his wife don't speak much on the walk home, not that Louis ever does. He had been warned about marrying an older woman—*big sister, little brother* romances failed more often than not—and *this* older woman was more challenging than some. Louis hadn't wanted to barter away his daughter. The whole thing was the wife's idea. Poor, innocent Khiem nearly bounced out of her skin at the slightest unexpected sound, and being asked to move a piece of furniture out of her room—an unfortunate necessity when the family had sold the better part of what they owned for food—reduced her to fits and tears. But what else could they do? They couldn't afford to feed her.

“She'll be fine!” The wife keeps repeating the sentence with so much conviction that Louis isn't certain of whom she is trying hardest to convince. “The old man wouldn't hurt a fly—a real softy. I know it! Besides, Khiem is our secret weapon!”

Looking up at the moon, in heavens wondrously unpolluted by the lights of man, Louis isn't sure about this. You never knew what would catch Khiem's fancy and what wouldn't. She could learn at a remarkable rate on her good days, driven as she was by an obsessiveness that pushed the limits of human ability, but on her bad days, she'd curl up and wait to die.

The wife is drawing close—*stomp, thump, stomp*—Louis had never heard another woman's feet hit the ground as loudly as do those of his wife. She could be almost silent when so inclined—those disproportionately large feet of hers could move with grace—but she was never so inclined around Louis. Perhaps she was once a secretary bird, and he, a snake or a lizard. One might assume that a single lifetime of kicking in heads would be enough, but only if one didn't know this particular gal. She could keep it up for eons—through thousands of cycles of death and rebirth—and with a cheerfulness that might well defy all scientific (and most spiritual) explanation.

“Hey, you are running away!” The wife calls out to Louis in Vietnamese, trying to sound jovial when she says it.



Louis doesn't answer.

She's caught up to him. She could power past him, but she doesn't. Instead, she merely keeps pace.

Louis likely misses Khiem more than Khiem misses Louis. Khiem *seems* to miss her routine more than anything else. But who knows? These female minds are essentially opaque to Louis: He doesn't know what Khiem really thought or felt when he and his wife walked away, leaving Khiem with Elmer. Khiem's expression, as usual, was impassive, her face a mask of apparent indifference, or anxiety, or frustration, or some strange emotion ordinary human beings would never be able to understand on even an abstract level, much less experience for themselves.

And he knows even less about his wife's true take on the matter. The wife has plenty of expressions—her plastic, perpetually animated face; along with her never-ending liveliness and her slightly warped sense of optimism; had drawn him to her, despite her already being well beyond her prime by the time they met—but he doesn't really know how much weight to assign any of them. He can never tell if she's acting. The simplest operational assumption is that she isn't, so Louis goes with that. And he's lost too much already. He doesn't have the heart to argue.

The pavement ahead is washed out. They hadn't come this way—the main path was faster, but only a maniac would travel it unarmed at night—and neither of them had been down this road for months. Louis looks over to his wife. He wishes he had brought his rifle. Thieves sometimes hid in the ditches, at least that is what Louis has been told, rapists and murderers too. He thinks he sees something moving in the shadows. The wife doesn't seem to notice.

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People grow laconic when they're paying by the word. Brutally, wonderfully laconic. There's no more *Why don't you pick up more ice cream? Listen to me more! Weneedtotalkaboutourfeelings. Howmanyboyfriendsdidyouhavebeforeme? Areyouabsolutelysureyouarentinfectious? Whataboutthewarts? ThelizardpeopleandJewsareresponsible . . .*

*Blah, blah, blah!*

They might well carry on with this nonsense in meatspace, but on the relay net, all was elegance and directness.

*Dad died Tuesday. Accidental gunshot. Oops! Best, Tim.*

*Jane had baby boy. Butt-ugly. Looks like neighbor. Jane infected. God help them. :-(*

The operators have more downtime than one might think, given that they are the last remaining reliable connection most people have with the world beyond the horizon, and the wait between messages is growing greater by the day. A few new stations pop up willy-nilly, but even more are disappearing—gas shortages, most likely. Some might get back online. Most won't, not unless something changes.

So what's an operator left to do? Shutting down for hours on end isn't practical. Getting the generator restarted is a herculean effort, and there is no way to store and forward text when a step in the relay is down—paper for unsent messages accumulates quickly and delays are cumulative. Going to sleep isn't an option: Elmer could miss a night's worth of work (and income) doing that, and gossip amongst the operators is tedious.

But there's weather. Weather and time.

Elmer gently removes his ancient Telefunken headphones, carefully gathering up the cloth-wrapped wires and placing them on his desk, and pushes back his chair, grabbing a pencil and notebook as he stands.

At the very edge of the cone of light are his targets. The first, a thermometer, hanging outside the window. The second, a rain gauge. The third—the only instrument inside the room—a barometer. During the day, he took measurements of wind speed and direction, carefully adding the information to his book, but he couldn't do that after sundown. And there isn't much of a breeze tonight. Elmer looks at his watch, closely calibrated to the old chronometer on his desk, and starts to write down the numbers.

*Dit! Dit! Dit!*