

Later that evening, my uncle stops by my grandmother's house on his way to work. He scolds me because, he claims, I nearly made his son, the one who plays football and works with power tools, faint.

This is the story no one will ever tell you about prosthetics. It's not a morality play and it teaches no useful lesson. No one will ever tell you how to discreetly pop a prosthetic back into place without making teenage boys faint. If I were writing a pamphlet on "Your New Prosthetic," I would suggest (right after the bit about the lightweight yet durable polymer) that you try to get past forgiving its imperfections. This is the one thing no one will ever suggest, but it is the one thing that will get you through this story and stories you cannot even imagine yet.

Alicia Kestrell Verlager is a recent graduate of MIT who writes about the intersections of disability and technology; you can visit her blog at <http://www.livejournal.com/~kestrell>.

CELL PHONES

E. Cabell Hankinson Gathman

I went to Japan in the Year of the Dragon, a terrified bleached blonde foreigner, because my heart was broken. I wanted to be alone, but it was in Tokyo in 2000 that I got my first cell phone. I don't remember how popular cell phones were in the United States at that time.

In high school, a few of my classmates had owned pagers, although we mostly associated them with drug dealing. During my college years no one in my family had a cell phone nor did my freshman or sophomore year dorm mates. As a female exchange student, however, I was housed in the Tokyo YWCA whose rooms did not have landlines. There was a single shared phone in the first floor corridor, across from the caretaker's apartment. Talking on it transported me to my imaginings of a 1950s' dormitory—it seemed a lot like prison. Receiving calls on the YMCA phone was even worse than attempting to make them, so the first thing resident students recommended to newcomers was that we get *keitai denwa*—cell phones—*keitai* for short.

I was nineteen years old, which made me a minor under Japanese law, unable to sign the *keitai* contract. Olga from Uzbekistan pretended to be my older sister and signed on my behalf. My choice of phone models was restricted by my near-total illiteracy in Japanese; I needed something bilingual, and I also wanted something pink. Fortunately I was in Japan, where even

bilingual phones came in pink—and not just pink, but a softly gleaming pearlescent shade, the keys smooth and jewel-like, marked with *hiragana* and Roman alphabetic characters beside the larger numerals. It wasn't long before I'd plastered the back of it with a sparkling translucent sticker of Hello Kitty wearing a scorpion costume, denoting my Western zodiac sign. When I came back from Hiroshima, it was with the dangling addition of a souvenir *keitai* charm from Miyajima Island, a metal maple leaf in brilliant neons.

It wasn't an international cell phone really, but it was possible to purchase international calling cards for it. It let me talk to my parents and to friends. I had a laptop but no Internet at the YWCA, and it was a semester before I figured out that I could get an Ethernet cable and connect my laptop on campus instead of waiting for the horrible slow machines at the student computer lab to become available. I mostly called people very late at night while drunk, which meant that it was usually about nine o'clock in the morning in Missouri, the place I was calling. My parents were pretty much the only ones willing to pay to call me, so if I wanted to talk to my friends, I had to call them. Looking back, I can see that this might have depressed me, but at the time it suited me fine. I had run off to Japan because it was the only place far enough away that seemed safe; I took comfort in controlling with whom I was in contact.

Alone in Japan I was safe from my relational ineptitude. In Missouri, there was a guy whose neediness had smothered me and a girl who made me wonder if I would ever find someone interesting who was also non-toxic. The only time I received a call from someone outside of my family, it was a mutual friend who phoned to tell me that the needy guy and the toxic girl had moved in together. She said she thought I would "want to know." It took me three intensive Harajuku shopping trips and an all-day visit to Tokyo Disney to recover from that phone call. After that, I preferred the radio

silence. It was a soothing necessity. Sometimes, for a moment, I would think I saw someone on the street I didn't want to see, but of course it was never she—always some slightly-off doppelganger, redrawn Japanese. And she didn't call.

I text messaged in Japan more than I ever have since. It was much cheaper than on American plans, and as my Japanese improved, the phonetic *kana* and pictographic *kanji* allowed me to communicate exponentially more meaning within the character limit for a single message than I ever could in English, even with the use of chat argot. Texting gave me something to do on the train, speeding through the city, never idle. In Tokyo, a world in itself, my glittering fairyland of the future, the *keitai* was an easy way to find my fellow students on the spur of the moment, colliding like lonely atoms in coffee shops and among the English language paperback racks at Kinokuniya. Throughout my travels on that colossal neon grid, the *keitai* was my talisman.

I brought it back to the United States even though it didn't work here—J-Phone, unlike its competitor DoCoMo, had no agreement with any U.S. mobile carriers. I tucked it into a drawer with its charger, and every now and then I took it out and stroked its plastic skin, switched it on and tried to remember the world that was and the blonde girl who had moved through it, carrying this *keitai*. Tokyo sat trapped inside it: the ring tone that I'd so painstakingly programmed, the old text messages, many of them in *kanji* and *hiragana*, exchanged with the people I knew there. Unlike email, those messages could be accessed only through the single handset onto which they had been downloaded. Unlike ruby slippers, the *keitai* could never really take me back, and it could never be integrated into my American life. Like my year in Japan, it just didn't fit. I came back from Tokyo feeling in some ways as if I'd never left Missouri at all—I was different, everything was different, but somehow no one realized that the world had shifted.

Like Lucy coming out of the wardrobe in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, no one even noticed I'd been gone. My *keitai* held the voices of Japan; it was useless to try to make it talk to Americans. That interval of my life was simply past, and no one remembered it but me. If I hadn't had the phone, it might not have ever happened at all.

American cell phones were ugly and squat. I knew more people who carried them, but the landline in my dorm room was free of charge and at Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri, where everyone I knew spent most of their time around the first-floor dorm lounge anyway, a cell seemed kind of pointless. There were no trains in Kirksville, no massive bookstores where you could lose your friends between the second floor and the fourth. I didn't need a cell phone there, and if I couldn't get a shiny pink one, then I didn't *want* one, either.

It was only two years later, when I graduated and picked up for Wisconsin, that I thought a cell phone seemed "worth it," and even then, only for practical reasons. It was the unlimited off-peak minutes that did it, the prospect of being able to make free calls on nights and weekends to people I was leaving behind. That cell phone was a very basic, navy blue Nokia, and our relationship was purely business. I carried it in my bag. It made me reachable in a strange place. I had cable Internet, and the only calls I ever got on my landline were for someone named Earl, who seemed to have run afoul of various authorities. No one believed me when I said he didn't live there anymore. I got the landline disconnected.

A couple of years after that, I switched networks and got a new Audiovox flip phone. Being able to keep my old phone number was a big deal, and the companies did everything they could to make it easy—no notifications of a changed number to be made, no relationships to be reaffirmed or discarded with the switch. I had to transfer my Nokia contact list to the new handset myself, but it seemed worth it. The new model felt

like the future. It was silver, not pink, but that was still an improvement over the matte navy blue of the plastic brick I'd been carrying around. And the Audiovox had a camera. I was very, very upset when, during the first month I owned the phone, I dropped it and scratched its casing. It still worked, but I couldn't shake the feeling that a luminous future had been marred.

It was some time before I discovered the vast selection of ring tones that I could download for the Audiovox. I quickly amassed quite the collection—"Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" announced my sisters; when my academic adviser called, the phone played "Sympathy for the Devil." My default was usually the theme song from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a peppy number that worked well when translated into polyphonic midi format and announced to anyone in earshot that here was a fellow *Buffy* viewer, if they cared.

I became involved with a man, an unavailable one this time—needy in his own way, but hardly willing to touch my shoulder in public. I can't really blame my cell phone, but in my heart of hearts I know it enabled our inappropriate connection. We rarely spoke in public—certainly nothing personal, no touching, nothing to betray us. He called me in the middle of the night, when we were both alone. Sometimes when I was trying to fight my way back to myself, to preserve some pride, I tried to get the cell phone to help me: the phone could be turned off, set to silent, shoved into a drawer across the apartment. Perhaps he was doing the same thing or just cared less. He didn't always answer his phone when I called—maybe half the time. But I got nervous if my cell phone was more than a yard away, afraid I might somehow miss his call, despite more than once having been woken from a relatively sound sleep by a ring tone from another room. I slept with the Audiovox at arm's reach, the volume cranked to maximum, waiting for the ring tone I'd set to herald his calls. Our song. He heard it once, when he had to call my phone

to wake me up from a nap so that I would let him into my apartment—of course I was sleeping with it at my side. He commented on it later, how he heard it on the other side of the door, our song signaling his presence. Our song, rendered polyphonic, my way of having him inside my Audiovox.

Sometimes I went to the Verizon Web site just to look at the call log for my account, as if the number of minutes we'd spoken in the past week could be plugged into a formula that would yield n , where n = *how much he loves me*. Once when he was angry he didn't call me for a week. I spent hours with my phone burning a lonely, desperate hole in my pajama pocket. We communicated more by email and chat than by phone, actually, but the phone calls always meant more to me; they remain relatively unspoiled in memory. He called me to whisper in my ear; he called me when I had to fly home to my dying grandmother. I saved voice mail for as long as Verizon would allow, calling back at the end of the twenty-one-day default period just to preserve them.

When he broke up with me, it wasn't by phone. He waited until I was once again in a foreign land, California, this time, away from everyone I knew, and then he broke up with me via instant messenger. We didn't speak for four months. Finally, he wanted to talk to me, but he didn't want to see me, and once again the cell phone was how he made me—how he made us—invisible. I thought at the time that he was afraid of me, that the phone was protecting him from me, but really it wasn't much different from the way the phone had always protected him—kept me secret, made me safe. Or maybe, because it was so easy to feel that I could be hidden inside his phone and inside his computer—never mind the data trail—he never had to confront whether the reality of what we had was really as bad as he thought it was. If he kept me in the invisible cracks of machines, he could have some part of me without facing me or his fears.

I took his number off my phone within hours after he'd broken it off. I had too much pride to leave myself easy access to his voice mail. I knew he'd never have the courage to pick up my calls. I didn't want to leave my own pathetic data trail. My grandmother died that same week, but I kept her number. There was still something that felt like a connection I didn't want to delete. I still have her number in my address book. His number, on the other hand, I wish I'd never known it at all. Yet I couldn't bring myself to delete his ring tone. Whenever I cycled through my store of tones, to change my default or set a tone for a particular contact, there it was, playing automatically as soon as I reached it on the list. Every time I heard it, it shocked me for a moment with instinctive pleasure, the sense that we shared something, that he wanted to talk to me, before it filtered through the present and I remembered that he hadn't even called to say he wasn't going to call anymore. I would skip past it as quickly as possible, but I always knew it was coming and didn't get rid of it. I came to think of this with a certain sense of humor: just my little tendency toward techno-mediated, psychic self-mutilation.

And then, last month, I got a new phone, an upgrade from Verizon. I consulted with my blog readership about which model to choose, first narrowing the field to two choices because of their superior built-in cameras, music-playing capabilities, and availability in pink. There were so many conflicting opinions that I finally had to go by instinct, choosing the model that seemed to have the more intuitive interface: the Motorola RAZR V3m. Its pink wasn't as vibrant as I would have liked, but there was a wide range of snap-on cases available for it, and I was able to find one in a pink and black zebra-skin pattern that seemed to be just right for me. I have also spent a lot of money on its ring tones. These are extravagant gifts to this phone and no other—unlike telephone contacts, Verizon will not let me transfer ring tones phone-to-phone. So, my dead grandmother's telephone number is in my new phone,

transferred with the rest of my telephone contacts. My dead relationship's ring tone is not.

And it's not just his ring tone that's gone. He belongs to another artifact. It sometimes feels as though the year of my life I spent in that ill-advised love affair was poured into the now-obsolete Audiovox. Like a gift that still possesses something of the soul of the giver, the phone itself had come to be haunted by the voice that spoke so often through it. I gave back everything he had given me, but I couldn't get him out of my phone. I used to get tattooed when love went wrong, remaking my body into one that had never known the touch of my former partner. Now I have a new phone into which I have never spoken too soon or not wisely enough. Now I have a phone from which I have never failed to hear the words I wanted. My new RAZR is a part of a me that is freshly born, unscarred.

And I carry it everywhere. I frequently speak on it as I move through public places—I find that it provides insulation against panhandling and unwelcome advances. It's difficult, after all, to engage someone in conversation when they are already talking to somebody else. If I can't get a signal, I don't go as far as my friends who will pretend to talk to a dead phone; I just play Tetris instead. The blonde girl with her pearlescent pink *keitai* will never walk the streets of Tokyo again, but now there's a pink-haired woman with a pink zebra-skin RAZR that trills "Heartbreak Beat" for default calls in Boston.

E. Cabell Hankinson Gathman is currently a PHD student in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research interests are in the use of Internet technologies—including social networking sites, virtual worlds, chat and blogs—to maintain and develop relationships.

THE PATTERNING TABLE

Nicholas A. Knouf

Our basement walls were covered with charts, schedules, and sets of instructions. In the southeast corner stood the patterning table. Made when I was eight years old by a friend of the family who lived in a nearby town, the patterning table came up to my chest. Supported on its four corners by thick wooden legs attached with massive bolts, the highly varnished table was strong enough for a fifty-to-eighty pound person to be moved around on its flat surface. That surface was padded with Naugahyde, which in turn was covered by sheepskin that fitted snugly around the edges.

At this table, every Monday through Saturday, three people (five, if we were training new volunteers) surrounded my sister, Robin. We gently took hold of her fragile arms, legs, and head. With a regular rhythm we moved her extremities in the motions of a crawl: one, turn the head to the left, bring the left arm away from the body and next to the head, bend the left leg next to the torso, and vice versa for the right side; two, keep the head where it was, pull the right arm back next to the body, extend the left leg, and vice versa for the right side; three, repeat as one, but switching left for right; four, repeat as two, but switching left for right. One, two, three, four, the count continued over the course of five minutes, and the patterning session was done, for this hour. The ding of a kitchen timer told us it was time to move on. Next hour we repeated it, on