
This text is shareware.

Please see the notice at the end.

Useful Life

Copyright © 1988 by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.

First published in ANALOG, October 1989

The phone rang. Its RANDOM light glowed, so he said, "Friendly Ear."

"Good morning, Friendly Ear." Her cultured voice hinted at New England aristocracy---Smith College, perhaps, and summers in Maine. Tennis whites bright enough to blind and dinner at the yacht club.

"Good morning." Wheeling to the next cactus bench, which sagged beneath two dozen containers of *Opuntia microdasys*---bunny ears, always a good seller---he scanned the rows of plants. Cottony wisps clung to one round pad of a very nice specimen. He hoisted the six-inch clay pot and tilted it to the diffused light streaming through the greenhouse panels overhead. Mealy bug. Damn.

"Ma'am? Can I help you?"

"Should I kill myself?"

"No." Ah, why did she have to ask so politely? Now she'd linger in memory like all the other considerate ones, narrating his nightmares with unforgettable courtesy. He set the pot back on the bench.

"No, you shouldn't, ma'am."

"Why?" Undercurrents of stress and fear, but no hysteria, no panic. Nearly-normal intonation, not the dead flatness of those so sunk in despair that only death offered hope. "What do you know about me?"

"That you have an enchanting voice and a good education." After dipping a cotton swab in rubbing alcohol, he leaned forward to dab it on the bugs. The alcohol would dehydrate them. "That you're a woman of strong character, and that you're talking to me. That's all."

"Then how do you know I shouldn't?"

"Because it's irrevocable. Because if it's right, you can do it any time, but if it's wrong, you can't ever take it back." He rotated the pot once. All gone. Good. He dropped the used swab into the paper bag clipped to the side of his wheelchair. If only he could save people as easily. Or care as little when he failed. "Life's better than death, honest. No matter how it may seem to you right now. God's honest truth---things will get better."

"Why did you volunteer?"

He relaxed. Anyone actually curious about another human being still wanted to live, whether she knew it yet or not. He could talk this one down. "Do you mean for Friendly Ear duty?"

"Yes. Are you one of those insufferably cheery and optimistic types the rest of us would like to strangle?"

A smile came to his lips; he let it into his voice. "More than a few of my acquaintances would enjoy strangling me, but it's doubtful that any of them would describe me as cheery and optimistic."

"Then why? I want to know. Please?"

Many of those who called just to talk asked that. He didn't mind answering, but he'd told the story so often that he feared it had become merely that: a story, rather than an ordeal he had survived. With each retelling, past pain and urgency grew more distant, more matter-of-fact. Someday he would discover that the emotions had dried up and blown away; that day, he would resign from the Friendly Ears. "Four years ago, the doctors told me they couldn't approve me for prosthetic legs after all, because the shrapnel had paralyzed me from the hips down and they couldn't get anything working again."

"Shrapnel? Were you in the war?"

"Yes, ma'am. In the hospital, they gave me a wristwatch with all the usual features and two really unique ones---gauges that display the pressure on the artificial sphincters implanted in my bladder and colon. They taught me how to read the gauges so that I'd know when to start looking around for a toilet, and how to open the valves between my legs so that I didn't get my hands dirty. They used the word 'lucky' a lot. As in, 'You know, soldier, you're lucky---most boys with wounds like these would have died.'"

"While you thought it was the dead ones who were lucky?"

"Exactly. So when they let me out, I got an ice pick, and crawled into a warm bath. The plan was to punch enough holes through the femoral artery on each leg so that it wouldn't take more than a few minutes to die. See, given no sensation below the hips at all, it wouldn't have hurt a bit. But how many holes to punch? I called a Friendly Ear. We talked for three, four hours. By the end of the call, he'd convinced me to wait one year. If life still sucked, I could do myself in with his blessings. At the end of the year, I looked around and decided things weren't so bad after all. Understand, they weren't *good*---they're still not---but they weren't so bad that death was preferable to life. This guy had me in his debt, but I couldn't pay him back. Friendly Ears are anonymous. So I joined hoping to do for others what he did for me."

She didn't say a word for a long time. He let silence fill the line while he wiped sweat from his forehead and inhaled the hot, dry air of his greenhouse.

"Friendly Ear?" she said at last.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Are you tracing my call?"

"You know that's impossible."

"I know they *say* it's impossible, but what I need to know is the truth---are you?"

"No. When you dial 1-8000-AFRIEND, some very special software that the phone company wrote exclusively for us takes over. It chooses a Friendly Ear at random and connects you without making any record of the call, internal or external. At this moment, Ma Bell's computers know that you're using your phone, and I'm using mine, but only one chip knows we're connected, and it won't tell the rest that we're talking to each other."

"Who else could we be talking to?"

"Ma'am, there are a hundred thousand Friendly Ears, and we each take a couple calls a day. There's four or five thousand calls going on right at this minute. Now, the computers might assume you're talking to a Friendly Ear and I'm talking to a new friend---if their programming lets them make that sort of assumption---but if they try trace the call, the chip disconnects us and zeroes its memory. So don't worry."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. Positive."

"Good." She paused for a few seconds. "I'm trapped here."

"That's a horrible feeling, isn't it?" He wheeled down the tiled path between the benches to the first tray of *Parodia*. "But how do you mean, trapped?"

"I mean I can't get away."

A familiar lament. Perhaps the most familiar of all. "You can't get away from what---a relationship? Your career?" Flowerbuds had swelled on four *Parodias* since Friday. He priced those pots and shifted them to the front row; his assistant would move them into the store tomorrow.

"The planet."

"Ah." Not so familiar. He straightened in his chair. The other *Parodia* trays could wait. "You mean this planet? The planet Earth?"

"Yes. I want to go home, but they haven't come back for me. It's been six years. They're not *coming* back. I'm going to die on an alien planet and I won't have a grave *loy* so why shouldn't I just go ahead and get it over with? It's not like anyone here will miss me."

He sighed, but softly enough, he hoped, that his earpiece mike did not pick up the sound. Not

for the first time, he wished the mentally disturbed of the world would call the Psych line instead of the Friendly Ear line. "Could you explain some of that, please? It's a little new to me, you see, and--"

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

He took a deep breath. A strange high hum came down the telephone line and lodged inside his skull. He had never heard anything like it before. It filled his brain, blurred his vision, and shivered the bones in his neck.

She seemed to be saying something, but the hum either drowned out her words, or so disoriented him that he could not understand her. His own lips moved. Though he had no idea what he said, the hum stopped.

"Well? Do you think I'm crazy or not?"

He tried the deep breath again. This time, nothing happened. "You have a unique perspective on the world, but that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you. Tell me--"

"Never mind. Thank you. Goodbye."

"No, wait!" he said, but she did not heed him. She hung up.

Defeated, he stabbed the disconnect button.

#

An hour later, the phone rang again. Since the RANDOM button did not light up, he expected a friend, or a supplier, or in the worst case, a creditor. "Pincushions Unlimited, Jess speaking."

"Hello, Jess. I wanted to apologize for breaking off so abruptly earlier this afternoon."

He stared at the phone set built into the arm of his chair. He opened his mouth. He closed it. He shook his head once and said, "How? How did you get this number?"

"Superior technology, Jess. Remember where I'm from?"

"Yes, but--"

"I thought you said you believed me." A teasing quality entered her voice. "Oh, Jess, now my feelings are hurt. Didn't you at least notice the buzzy sort of white noise in the middle of your mind?"

"That was you?"

"Yes---well, not me, personally, you understand, just my overrider. They issue them when we arrive. Very useful in unpleasant situations. Sometimes you just have to convince someone that he has to do what you want, not what he wants. So you tap it, think the command, and it's done. And afterward-- well, you don't remember giving me your name and phone number, do you?"

"No. No, I don't." He swallowed hard as potential uses for such a device suggested themselves to him. "God, if that ever fell into the wrong hands--"

"It can't. It's implanted bio-electronics, keyed to one particular set of genes. Even if someone could cut it out without killing it, it wouldn't work for him. So don't worry. Besides, it's not all that powerful---it won't run for more than ten seconds at a time, and takes forty-eight hours to recharge." A near-giggle escaped her. "Rather like some men I know."

"Um.... Um.... You sound like you're in a better mood."

"Oh, I am!"

"Well, that's nice. What, um, what provoked it?"

"I've decided to accept your advice. I'll give life another month. May I still talk to you?"

"Sure! Yes, listen, I wanted to ask you, where is your home?"

"Are you an astronomer?"

"No."

"Then what difference would a name make?"

"None. Would you like to talk *about* your home? Why do you miss it so much? What does it have that Earth doesn't?"

"Two moons," she said, "a freshwater lake the size of Texas, and winters so cold that all you can do is sleep until spring. I *belong* there, I fit in. I don't feel self-conscious, there. I don't feel like a spy."

"Are you? Is that why you're here?"

"No," she said mournfully, "no, I'm just a tourist who missed her flight."

"There'll be another, won't there?"

"They promised to come back for me---they left a note---but they haven't. And there aren't any more flights. Not with a war going on."

"The war ended three years ago," he said softly, his eyes closed, the phantom ache rising in the legs he'd left in Buenos Aires.

"Not *your* war. *Ours*."

"Ah. So...so tourist flights are canceled for the duration?"

"Yes. Leaving me trapped here. Marooned."

"But when the war's over--"

"Who knows when that will be?"

"That's why it's good you've decided to wait. Because when the war is over, and they make the effort to return for you, if you aren't here--"

"I know," she said in a very small voice. "They'll feel cheated. Betrayed. But that's how I feel right now, don't you see?"

"Yes, of course. How else *could* you feel? But it's not their fault, is it?"

"Yes, it is! They waited for all the others---they could have waited another hour for me---but they didn't. They left early!"

"Because of the war?"

"Yes. That's what the note said, anyway. So there I was in the parking lot with all my luggage, scads of souvenirs, and absolutely no money."

"Parking lot?"

"It was the rendezvous point. The bus was supposed to take us to the ship."

"Uh-huh. So what did you do?"

"What could I do? I went into the diner and asked for a job."

"And got it?"

"I've been a waitress ever since. And I'm tired of it. My feet hurt, I'm always getting pinched, and the boss takes half my tips. If it weren't for the overrider...."

"Why not look for another job?"

"Because I have to be here when the bus comes back, don't you see? Either here, or dead. If I'm dead, it doesn't matter, but if I'm not, and it comes back and I miss it again, then I'm stranded here forever and I'll go crazy, and I'd rather die than lose my mind."

"So you have to live in the parking lot?"

"No, the bus will wait twenty-four hours. I just have to check once a day. But-- Jess, I can't talk any more now. I'll call you back next month. Thank you. Goodbye."

She hung up before he could say a word.

#

Five weeks later, the phone rang. "Pincushions Unlimited, Jess speaking."

"Hello, Jess. It's me."

"Well, hello there, how are you?"

"I feel miserable, Jess. I gave it a month and five days extra, but it's not going to work, and they're not coming back for me, and--"

"Talk to me, huh?" He wanted to stall her for a while, and keep her from doing something rash until he had cheered her up. If she could get past this moment of ultimate bleakness, she could do another month, or a year, or a lifetime....

"I just borrowed an ice-pick from the diner's kitchen. I've drawn a nice, warm bubble bath, and I've taken off my clothes. I've been thinking of you ever since I made up my mind, so I decided to call and thank you for your help."

Weary desolation welled up in him. "No, listen, you can't---that's not fair---my God, I tried to

talk you *out* of it, and now you're going to use the same method-- Don't you know how much it's going to hurt? Don't you know how awful I'm going to feel? Lady, please, my nightmares already have casts of thousands, please don't add another voice to them."

She paused for a few seconds. "What is 'Pincushions Unlimited'?"

"My greenhouse. We raise cacti and succulents. Mostly cacti."

"Why?"

"Because cacti are relatively cat-proof. They don't mind neglect, and they're beautiful when they bloom."

"Like *loy*." A note of wistfulness sounded.

"You used that word before."

"They're similar to cacti---I mean, they're green and spiky---they're very short, but they grow sideways for oh, yards and yards. We plant them on our graves. I think originally it was to keep the wild animals from digging up the bodies, but now it's a tradition. Does it excite you to be talking to a woman who's told you she's naked?"

"It might," he said dryly, "if I had anything to be excited with."

"*Nothing?*"

"They offered to install an 'appliance,' but it seemed, um, unlikely that it would ever see any use.

So...."

"Poor Jess."

"It could be worse."

"How?"

"I could have an ice-pick in my hand."

"*Touche*," she said softly.

"Nothing personal."

"Oh, of course not."

"Ah...say, how do you pass for a native? Make-up and costume?"

"Oh, no! The travel agency maintains a stable of hosts. We use them like tour guides. I picked one from the catalog, and they poured me into it when I got here."

"Host?" The skin at the back of his neck prickled. A new horror would haunt his nightmares, now. "What do you mean, 'host'?"

"Oh, don't worry! These are-- I'm sure you're familiar with the tabloid stories about people being kidnaped by UFO's?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, some of them, at least, are true. When the travel agency needs to expand its stable, or to replace an obsolete host, then it captures someone---non-violently of course---takes cell samples, and records the brain on hologram. It uses the cell samples to grow the guide in a tank. At the same time, some very sophisticated programs edit out of the brain hologram all details of a personal nature without in any way affecting the tourist's ability to get along in the culture. Once the host reaches the appropriate maturity, they implant the background knowledge and skills. When the guide is rented, they pour the tourist's being in on top. After the trip is over, they pour the tourist's being out, erase the tourist's personal memories from the brain, and then stable the host until someone else rents it. It's really very simple."

He suppressed a shudder. "Where do they um, keep the hosts when they're not, um, working?"

"Oh, I couldn't tell you that."

"Okay. Uh-huh. What happens to an 'obsolete host'?"

"I don't know. It's not in the brochure."

"No." He rubbed his eyes. "No, it wouldn't be."

"Are you angry with me?"

"Ah...probably more at your system than at you. Although, now, you know, it's not suicide you're talking---it's murder. God, that body's kept you alive here, don't you feel any responsibility--"

"Wait."

A clack came through his earpiece; he presumed she had just set her telephone down. Something rasped--a window opening? Then a human squeal of delight and her breathless voice: "Jess! The bus! It's here! Oh my God, oh thank you, Jess! Good-bye!"

The line clicked. After a few seconds a dial tone burred softly.

#

The next month, a woman came into the greenhouse and approached him. Tall and middle-aged, she carried herself like an executive, or an aristocrat. Streaks of grey put character into her light brown hair. She had laugh lines around her mouth, experience in her eyes, and a discreet, flesh-colored bandage just below her left ear. "Jess? I'm Amanda Green," she said in the WASP-ish voice of moneyed New England. She held out her hand.

He recognized the voice at once, and stared at her hand for a long moment before finally taking it. At least she had a firm grip. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for work. A former customer recommended you." She withdrew an envelope from her purse and handed it to him. "My resume. I was a tour guide for twenty years, and a waitress for six. Both jobs require an ability to get along with people, a skill I'm sure would come in useful in your retail operation. And the fact that I stayed in each job as long as I did shows that I don't give up easily. Why not give me a try?"

He tapped the unopened envelope against the back of his left hand. He did not really want to ask the next question, but he had to. "Why did you quit as a tour guide?"

"Oh, I didn't quit." She smiled ruefully. "They're a foreign firm, and they discontinued American operations during the war. That's why I became a waitress." She shrugged. "Just as well, actually. Except between assignments, I never had a life I could call my own."

He handed the envelope back to her.

She took it hesitantly, the first strains of a frown pulling her eyebrows together.

"There's no openings out front," he said. "Besides, I doubt if you know your cacti well enough to work the retail store."

"But Jess, I can learn--"

"And you will. Back here in the greenhouse. Wear comfortable shoes and clothes you don't mind getting dirty. Be here at six."

"Thank you." She shook his hand and walked away.

He watched her go, and wondered if either of them would ever speak of the truth to the other--or if either would ever recognize the truth if the other did speak it.

He thought he might have nightmares about that.

---end---

About This Edition

This electronic edition has been made available for shareware distribution by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr., the copyright holder. It may be reproduced electronically, and converted into other electronic formats, provided it appears unchanged in its entirety, including all this edition information, and it is never offered for sale, nor placed on a site or volume where there is a fee for access. Permission to reprint in any other fashion is specifically prohibited. All other rights reserved.

If you enjoyed reading it, please use PayPal (www.paypal.com) to send US\$0.20 (twenty US cents) to kodjr@sff.net. If PayPal is not available in your nation, please give the equivalent amount to the charity of your choice.

Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.
May 9, 2000
