

FRANKENPHONE

by Ed Miracle

Nando bent to the circle of light on his worktable and lowered his magnifiers. He cranked up his fix-it music, to sterilize any boy-noise from the living room. Repairing the TV remote might sober his silly grandsons long enough to . . . what? Impress them? Their conversations ran to bean gas. Nando shook his head and took up a screwdriver.

Terri's old cellphone yielded to a twist, and Nando laid its guts aside. This left a functioning keypad that had not been thrown across the room or stomped by cowboy boots. He filed a slot in its plastic case, then excised the emitter and power module from the defunct remote. Once he glued these worthies in place, he was one IC chip away from repairman's glory: a rejuvenated channel changer.

Downstairs, under his fix-it music, the boys were popping popcorn and arguing. They were supposed to check on him now and then, yet he had always been the watcher in this house, looking out for everyone. Last week he replaced a dying thermocouple in the water heater, for which Terri thanked him. Her sons didn't know and didn't care.

Under magnification, the cellphone chip and the remote chip were not a match, so Nando flipped cellphone innards until he found two good IC's. He could jigger the smaller one's voltages by transplanting a few diodes from the remote. Thirty minutes of microsurgery and a round of heat-sink soldering and Nando's Frankenphone lay spotlighted on the table.

Downstairs the boys were snarking a chick-flick that blared from their one-and-only TV channel. He descended to them and pointed his gizmo at the screen. The keys clicked, but nothing happened. He clicked some more and twisted it sideways, but nothing happened.

"Wrong one, Papa." The boys giggled. "You can't tune the TV with a cell phone."

Terri's oldest son, Jesse, grabbed for it, but Nando jerked the Frankenphone clear, aimed it down

at Mister Bad Manners, and pressed Off. Fat chance.

Pop poppity!

Six white kernels shot from a bowl betwixt the brothers, ricocheted off the ceiling and rained on their vacant heads.

“Whoa! Gimme that thing.” Jesse leaped for Nando's hand and liberated the Frankenphone. He spun it toward the kitchen and clicked every key until he triggered the one marked Off.

Ka-froome! Rackata-pock-rackata.

A nearly-full bag of hard yellow corn exploded into flying white projectiles. They peppered Jesse, turbulated every flat surface and settled like snowflakes from a clown cannon.

Jesse whooped and hollered. He pounded Nando's back. Daniel laughed so hard he wet himself.

“Way to go, Papa.”

Nando grinned and partook of their joy. Relief came from knowing the darn thing worked, albeit not usefully. His redemption, from fool to National Hero, would only be temporary.

“You made the mess,” he said, and he snatched the phone from Jesse. “You clean it up—before Theresa gets home from work.”

He departed through the front door, flushed and chagrined, eager for some night air, which was warm and intimate. It breathed on his ears as tenderly as Gloria would. Her place was three blocks north, but he had nothing to give her, just this goof-phone. So he headed south.

The bodega on Wilshire had started as a market, a real *Mercado*. Now it sold sugar snacks, tobacco, and booze, to those slack-faced night-cruisers in their dusty cars. Also to a retired electronics technician who imagined Gloria frowning her disapproval, even as a pint of Southern Comfort called his name. Nando licked his lips and fingered his pants for the money he had not brought. He swallowed and retreated from the counter, flushed again.

“Something for you, *Abuelo?*” Grandfather, the clerk called him.

He waved to her, tripped over a bump, and hurried from the buzzing lights. Retrieving his

whiskey funds suddenly depended on getting home before Terri did.

Perhaps it was inevitable. From behind a dumpster stepped a mugger, grim and twitchy, his right hand swollen around the butt of an ugly 9-millimeter pistol. Its silver rectum glared at Nando.

“You,” said the non-metallic rectum. “Give it up.”

Nando stopped. He held his hands wide.

“I left it at home, see” He turned out his pockets, offered the Frankenphone.

“Shit,” said the asshole. “Does that thing even work?”

Nando aimed it at him and pressed Off.

Ka-boom!

Between them, a thunderous flash sprayed hot stinging nettles into Nando's arms and chest. His cheek burned and he staggered. The mugger shrieked. One of his criminal hands gripped a wrist beyond which no fingers remained, just a mangle of red and white gristle.

Nando twisted away. He ran from the screams: one block at top speed then half another, before his heaving, burning lungs forced him to stop.

The gun had blown up, or rather its ammunition had. Ten rounds maybe. With no barrel to contain the ones in the magazine, they became tiny grenades. The Frankenphone must have ignited all their primers, all at once, as it had the popping corn back at the house. A bullet from that silver barrel had crazed his cheek, he was sure of it.

He leaned on a parked Chevy, discovered red prickles on his arms and coming through his shirt. He was wounded yet alive. The mugger's hand had absorbed most of the energy, probably sparing Nando's life. *That asshole.*

Sirens approached from ahead and behind. Nando scuttled to the corner and hurried down an unfamiliar street, over rangy lawns and past stucco houses, where nobody was afoot. At the next corner sat a shop, smaller than a house, its red-on-yellow signs proclaiming PAWN and GUNS and AMMO. Tools for a thug, though the armory stood closed and dark.

Maybe his Frankenphone was not so useless, after all. He aimed it at the shop and pressed Off. A muffled *boom* rolled up the street. No shrapnel, though the windows shattered in a gratifying crash. A flicker of yellow soon brightened its grim interior.

Nando pocketed his phone and strolled toward Wilshire, his liquor lust no longer so urgent. How many gang-bangers could he pop in a single white Honda? They seemed to like Hondas. Pop-goes-the-gangster might be a fun new hobby. Rid the streets. Stop the drive-bys. Clean up the neighborhood. Gloria would approve. Gloria would jump his bones.

He didn't notice the police cruiser until it cut him off at a driveway and two cops got out, a man and a woman.

"Excuse me, sir." The policewoman shined a light on him. "But you don't look so good."

"No ambulance," he insisted, between her questions.

"Fernando Lujan," she read from his ID card. "Do you know Terri Lujan, one of our dispatchers?"

They called Terri, who wanted him taken to a hospital. But Nando was not under arrest. He was sober and adult and not dying, so they brought him home, as requested. Terri helped him out of his bloody shirt and dabbed fizzy peroxide on his wounds. Her boys peered wide-eyed from a mostly-cleaned-up kitchen.

"Papa, what were you doing out there tonight? Where were you going?"

"To see Gloria."

Terri glanced at the cops in the doorway.

"Gloria left him last year," she said, "and moved to Chestnut Street, just before she died."