

## 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 rising 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 and booger jokes. 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 gleefully stomped by cowboy boots. He filed a slot in its plastic case, then excised the emitter and the power module from the remote. Once he glued these worthies in place, he was one IC chip away from repairman's glory: a rejuvenated channel changer.

Downstairs, beneath his fix-it music, the boys were popping popcorn and arguing. They were supposed to check their grandpa now and then, yet he had always been the watcher in this house, the one looking out for everyone else. 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 laid Nando's rejuvenated Frankenphone before him on the table.

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

"Wrong one, Papa." The boys giggled. "You can't tune a 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 popcorn exploded into flying white projectiles. They peppered Jesse, turbulated every flat surface, and settled like confetti 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 elderly fool to National Hero, could 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 LA night air, which was warm and intimate. It breathed onto his ears as tenderly as Gloria once had. 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 noxious, dusty cars. It also sold consolation 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 twenty dollars he had not brought with him. He swallowed and retreated from the counter, flushed again.

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

He waved to her, tripped on the door sill, 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 baggy-pants mugger, grim and twitchy, his right hand swollen around the butt of an ugly 9-millimeter pistol. Its shiny black rectum glared at Nando.

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

Nando stopped. He held his hands wide. “I left my money at home, see . . .” He turned out his pockets, offered the Frankenphone.

“Shit,” said Mr. 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 to the heavens. 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 bloody scene: one block at top speed then half another, before his heaving, burning lungs forced him to stop.

The gun had blown up, he realized, or rather its ammunition had. With no barrel to contain ten rounds in its magazine, they became tiny grenades. The Frankenphone must have ignited all their primers at once, as it had the popping corn back at the house. One bullet had grazed his cheek, he was sure of it.

He leaned on a parked Chevy, discovered red speckles spotting 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 north and south. Nando scuttled to the corner and hurried down an unfamiliar street, over rangy lawns and past stucco houses where nobody was home. At the next corner sat a house made into a shop, its red-on-yellow signs proclaiming PAWN and GUNS and AMMO.

Tools for thugs, 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 tinkle. A flicker of yellow soon brightened its 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 white 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. "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?"

He nodded.

They notified Terri, who wanted him taken to a hospital. But Nando was not under arrest. He was sober and adult and not dying, so they took him home, as he requested. Terri arrived and helped him out of his bloody shirt. She dabbed fizzy peroxide on his wounds while 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 Chester Street, just before she died."