

Telephone Hour

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Look into the heart of a city and see what you find. Peer into the depths and see the walking dead. The city is a place of mystery, of intrigue, a place of darkness and hostility. The city is unfriendly. Ride the bus and get off at any corner and we see the madness and darkness as we step onto the cold, grey cement. Ride the bus and get off on Lake Michigan Avenue, Ohio Street, or even at the corner of Ninth and St. Clair. Face the stains, face reality. We ride the bus and we get off at Ninth and St. Clair, and we step into the world of Thomas, a world where Thomas is the only good and the only evil.

Tucked away in his corner apartment, Thomas hovers over his phone. He is poised, wound tight as the last echoes of the ringing fade away into the cracks of the cement-block walls. His eyes dart from the black phone to the door with eleven deadbolts; polished, gleaming, identical deadbolts. The deadbolts are all brand new. He lets his gaze travel to another door in the wall. This one is black and wooden, but unbolted. The door is cracked open and inside he can see books that reach from the floor to the ceiling, filling every available inch of space in the entire room. The books are spiral pads colored red, green, blue, yellow and purple. In darkness, though, they are all a faded grey. Seeing them sleeping like that, it only takes a glance to key his stiff body into animation.

Thomas wakes at 8:00 am, as he always does, even though he has never owned an alarm clock. He rises, steps into his once brown, but now grey, leather lace-trailing shoes, pulls a pair of paint splattered tan working pants over the shoes, throws on a red hunting shirt with brown patches on the sleeves, and places a navy knit winter hat on his head. He shuffles to his door, releases the eleven shining deadbolts, closes the door behind him, pulls out a massive silver ring with eleven keys, and systematically locks the bolts. He turns, descends three flights of stairs, picks up a stack of newspapers in the foyer of his apartment building, and walks down the stone steps to the sidewalk lining Ninth Street. Once there, he cuts the string on the papers, fifty copies of The Daily, and lifts the top one off the stack. He raises the paper high above him, moving slowly, as if activated by mechanical hydraulic force, until his arm reaches full extension and stops. He

only stands for five minutes before he is approached by his first customer.

"Hi, Thomas!" the man says with a deep, rich voice. "Almost beat ya' out this morning. Thought I might've had a chance 'cept the 7:30 train at Petti-bone was five minutes late."

Thomas looks at the sky. He sees the grey clouds of a November day as he listens to the man ask him why he always wears the same clothes. The voice sounds familiar, but he doesn't attempt to place it. His eyes scan down the face of the apartment building across the street. He sees open windows, sees clothes hanging out to dry, sees the constant color changing of a small square television. He sees heavy drapes covering several of the windows, drapes that shut out the world. The face might be that of one of his "regulars," but he can't tell because he never sees it. The man is talking about the rising gas prices which have led him to start riding the trains into the city and about the new briefcase he has just bought. Thomas returns his attention back to the sky and continues to ignore him, not listening, but not thinking, either. Then the man is gone, walking down Ninth Street into the insanity of downtown. Thomas pulls out another paper, raises it above him, and stands motionless; a modern artist's tribute to a twenty-first century Statue of Liberty.

He crosses from the phone, throws open the door, falls to his knees, snatches up a notebook, opens it to the last page, sees it is covered with numbers, replaces it, then grabs for another. Looking amidst the stacks of notebooks, it takes him several tries before he finds one that is not completed. Quickly retracing his steps to the phone, Thomas lunges for the receiver, nearly knocks it off the white pedestal, then brandishes it high over his head with an extended arm. With his back to the pale streetlights shining through the third-story apartment, the polished, black receiver glints as it catches reflections of the lights and casts white along the walls. He rips through the pages of the notebook, searching frantically for his last entry. Finally, with a sense of overwhelming success, he tumbles upon the last recording of the day before, "335-6874." Dashing the notebook to the ground, he stabs at the numbers on the face of the phone, rattling the phone's innards with each powerful strike. He dials

335-6875.

"You have reached Furnitureland," a pre-recorded male voice says over the phone. "All our lines are busy right now, but if you would like to hold, an operator will be along shortly to help you with whatever furniture questions or needs you might have..."

He presses the receiver into the side of his head, gripping the black object fiercely. The dull plastic wears a groove just above his ear.

"...and love seat combo for only \$280," the recording is saying in it's metallic, monotonous voice.

Thomas slams the receiver back home into its cradle. His sweaty hands slip away and he searches for a pencil to mark the number into a notebook.

The number recorder, he dials 335-6876.

"Guy's 24-hour Coffeehouse, can I help you?" a young female voice asks into the mouthpiece after two rings. The voice is innocent. In the background, he can hear the clinking of dishes being washed and stacked, the electronic beeps and manual crashes of a register ringing up sales, and the persistent, low hum of the nightly customers conversing in subdued tones.

"Hello?" she says. "Hello?!...HE-LLO?!!!"

There was a short pause, then the sweet voice turns to ice.

"Listen, you creep! I am **sick to death** of these disgusting phone calls. You think this is funny?"

She stops and waits for some sort of response, but Thomas has already disconnected her as he lets the receiver fall from his grasp and tumble onto its mount. The sound of plastic meeting plastic rings in his ears and seems to bounce off the walls of the apartment.

He marks the number in the notebook and dials 335-6877.

Footsteps outside the door. Thomas lies on the cold, cement floor which blends into the cinder-block walls and makes his room look like a cell block. It is his prison. The jailor is outside.

Knock, knock!

Thomas is laying face down on the newspapers that make up his bed. His arms rest close to his side and his nose and chin flatten on the copy of the Sunday Daily.

Knock, knock! "Thomas," a voice calls into the room.

Newsprint is on his face and he sees the black words that are only a blur from the closeness of his face to the newspaper.

"Thomas, I know you're in there!"

His arms slide up his body and wing out like a

grasshopper. The papers rustle under him. He shoves with his upper body and his torso rolls over, off of the papers and onto the dusty cement floor. He slowly rises.

"I hear you moving, Thomas...let me in."

Thomas stands in front of the eleven deadbolts and reaches for the top one. He touches the shiny, cold metal and flips it to the right. It snaps as the clockwise motion carries it all the way around. He does the same with each of the remaining ten locks, but leaves the three chains in place. He turns the handle on the door, and it opens only as far as the chains will allow.

The landlord stands in the hall of his respectable apartment building and wonders why he ever allowed someone as lunatic as Thomas to rent a place from him. He thinks about this as the eleven new deadbolts slowly release, one at a time.

The door cracks open and the landlord sees a blood shot eye peering out through the space. The eye is black around the edges and hides beneath a swatch of greasy black hair. The eye looks out at him suspiciously. He sees half a mouth with nearly black lips. There is a beard on Thomas and it grows wildly, untrimmed.

Beyond the eye, the landlord sees a piece of the room. He sees newspapers on the floor and barely, a black telephone resting on the floor and barely, a black telephone resting on a white pedestal. The room is dark because the only light is that which is let in through the windows.

"Thomas, I need your rent," he says.

The eye looks at him, unblinking, and the mouth does not even twitch.

"C'mon, Thomas, we go through this every month. I...need...your...rent. You know, the green stuff that you give me so you can live here..."

The eye continues to stare at him unblinkingly. But the mouth suddenly moves and the door shuts in the landlord's face. From outside, the landlord hears the bolts slowly click as, one by one, they are locked back into their secure positions.

He listens and hears the shuffling of calloused feet scrape against the cement floor. They move slowly, rhythmically. They fade out of earshot, and the landlord has to wait in silence for several minutes. Then he hears them again and they approach the door. He hears rustling at his feet and sees a tattered envelope appear from under the door. He bends and looks at the envelope. Inside is the money Thomas owes in rent. He takes the money, places it in his pocket and slides the envelope back under the door. There is silence from the other side. The landlord stands and walks away from Thomas for another month.

In the first ring, a woman with a nasal voice picks up the phone and continues talking as if she has just been interrupted from a very intense conversation. Thomas toys with the twisted phone cord. He carefully inserts his middle finger through the black coils until it completely disappears, completely engulfed in the winding plastic. He is slow, methodic, sensual in the way that he wraps his hands up with the black cord. The coil becomes a living thing in his bone white, blue-veined hands. It is a black snake; black and poisonous.

"...I just don't know about Jason," she is saying. "He never goes out and plays with the other boys in the neighborhood. Of course, it's probably because **they** never ask him to. You know, I just heard on Oprah the other day that children that are too assertive at an early age can grow up to have psychological problems in the workplace. Can you believe it? **Psy-cho-lo-gi-cal pro-blems...**for being **assertive!** Can you imagine? Anyway..."

Thomas lets the phone crash down on its cradle as the cord slides away from his fingers. He places the pencil on the white pedestal beside the phone and quickly dials the next number.

"Hello, this Charley speaking. Can I help you, please?" a small voice inquires after one ring.

Seconds pass and the voice asks shyly, "Hello? Is anybody there?"

The plastic of the receiver is warm against his face and condensation has gathered on the mouthpiece where Thomas exhales. The muscles in his hand begin to spasm from gripping the receiver for such a long time without a rest. Faintly, he hears behind the child a parental voice.

"Who is it, honey?"

"I don't know," says the child. "They won't answer."

"Then hang up and come back to the table."

The phone clicks and a dial tone again rebounds in Thomas' head. He marks the number and calls another. This time he dials 335-6879.

From outside on the street, Thomas appears to be a living silhouette in the window of his third-story corner apartment. The phone glued to his face is an abnormal growth, and the cord springs from his ear in the evening shadows. The number he dials rings five times before it is picked up.

"He-Hello?" a frail woman's voice nearly whispers into the mouthpiece.

"I-Is that you, Ben?" she asks. "Are you home? Home from the war?"

Thomas stares at the black casing of the phone. He sees its rounded corners and runs his finger between the numbers on the touch-tone face. It is smooth, smooth as the porcelain sink of his kitchen.

"I'll be right there, I promise. I'll take you out to dinner, at Rick's Cafeteria, your favorite...I remember. And we can walk to Higbee's, and I'll buy you...What?" the voice cracks. "Oh, you're right, we'll have to go to the Arcade, first, so you can try and win a stuffed bear for your bed..."

Thomas' ear throbs from the pressure of the durable plastic against his delicate flesh. His pale, shrunken hand becomes invisible as he rests it on the white of the pedestal.

"Why did you never write to me, Ben? Why did you make me wait so long to hear? Don't you know the torture these two years have been? But you must, because now you've come home...home, to your lonely mama....," she practically whispers into Thomas' ear.

The delicate voice is silent for a moment, as if it is waiting with patience while a young, excited voice answers its unanswered prayers. Then, at a suitable breaking point, it picks back up again with newfound energy and continues its conversation with whichever angel it hears.

"But I'll see you soon, though. Right, Ben? Just as..."

There is a crack as Thomas slams the phone back onto its cradle hard enough to split the molded casing. He records the number in the notebook, then dials 335-6880.