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A TEXT MESSAGE

Katherine Elaine Sanders



LAST NIGHT AT 9:24 pm I received an anonymous text message:

You're going to hate me but I'm leaving Utah in the morning.

The text was sent by an area code 503 number which means that the cell phone came from Oregon. I recognize this immediately because that's where I grew up and got my first cell phone. The number came with me to college, but I changed my number to a Utah number when my former summer fling kept calling me five times a day. Despite having this Utah number for three years now, I still occasionally receive calls from strangers inquiring for Julie. Apparently Julie was the previous owner of my

Utah cell phone number. Even after three years, whenever the Julie-seekers call my phone, I still feel obligated to apologize for not being Julie—even though I don't know who she is and will most likely never know her. I always feel annoyance and pity for these people that she, perhaps like me, deliberately chose not to give her new cell phone number to.

Other times after I say “Hello?” I am greeted by a recording telling me that I need to register my car or return my videos to Blockbuster—I have neither a car, nor a Blockbuster account. One time a woman called my cell and yelled at me in Spanish. I didn't understand a word. I tried to tell her my side of the story in English, but this only seemed to make her more upset. I had to hang up on her and guiltily ignore her subsequent calls.

We have no control over whom we inherit our cell phone numbers from. A friend of mine inherited calls from the FBI, IRS, and multiple collection agencies for about a year, all trying to contact some character named Michael. The most interesting phone calls came from gruff voices—different voices every time. These callers told my friend, despite her protests, to tell Michael that they had “got the stuff,” and that he should come pick it up

immediately. These calls continued until she threatened to contact the police.

:-) ¹

Was this text message I received directed to a previous owner of my number? I had no way to know. But the familiar tone and apparent urgency of the text made me feel uneasy:

You're going to hate me but I'm leaving Utah in the morning.

The person who wrote this text clearly appreciated traditional spelling and grammar. Instead of using abbreviated txt that makes me 1DR what the 411 is, this person spelled out every word correctly. Not only that, they used capital letters: the Y in “You’re”, the I in “I’m”, and even the U in “Utah”. They even bothered to use apostrophes and end with a period. Place a comma in front of

¹ This is an emoticon. If you tilt your head to the left, it resembles a face—in this case, a smiley face. For more information on emoticons please see <http://neuage.org/se/phd/storm/abbreviations.htm>

the coordinating conjunction “but” and the text would have been grammatically flawless.

You're going to hate me—it seems like there was some previous obligation—why else would the person suspect that I am going to hate them? This anonymous text wouldn't normally have bothered me so much except that a couple weeks ago my cell phone stopped working and its contents, my contacts, were unsavable. I sent desperate emails to family members and close friends in order to collect the vital information, but now whenever I receive a text message from anyone who is not one of those six people, I see only a number, not a name.

;) ²

Last Saturday I called my parents. I heard the phone ring on the other end and after a couple of rings my mom's cheery voice came on the line, “Hello?”

“Hi Mom,” I began. “How are you?”

“Hello?”

“Can you hear me?” I tried again.

2 This person is winking. I like this emoticon because I can't wink in real life. This emoticon allows me to wink at people in a digital virtual reality.

“Hello-oh, anybody there?”

“You seriously can’t hear me?” Apparently not; she hung up. A few minutes later, my parents tried calling me. My phone rang and I answered. “Hello?” I said carefully, loud, and clear. Silence. “Hello?” I repeated, more carefully, more loudly, and more frustrated, “Hello?!”

I heard my dad’s voice, “Are you there? I can’t hear you at all.”

“DAD, I’M RIGHT HERE. CAN’T YOU HEAR ME?!”

Silence again³. And then he hung up. I quickly called a friend’s cell phone to be sure that it wasn’t my phone that had the problem. It was my phone. The same result: I heard my confused friend’s voice, but he couldn’t hear me. The situation hit me like a bad metaphor: I was voiceless and it was like I didn’t exist. I could hear the silences where my voice should have been. I spoke, I

3 Silences like this bother me. I don’t like silences on the phone. I don’t like silences in face-to-face conversations either. I continually catch myself humming on the phone or in person just to fill in the silence gaps. Friends who know me well know my tune—the stupid little melody I hum unconsciously when conversation runs dry.

shouted, but I was unheard. My short time of voicelessness forced me to hear the undeniable truth: the cell phones we create for the purpose of simplifying our lives inherently complicate them.

Cell phones do more than just place calls. They express individuality and style. Almost every feature of the inanimate cell phone object can be personalized and “person-alized.” When we shop for a cell phone, we evaluate color, shape, and size. We buy clothes-like covers for our phones or sometimes even ports or beds to tuck them into. Not only can we choose between built-in ring tones, but we can download songs and other sound clips from the Internet. These can be saved as a ring-back which allows your caller to hear your favorite song while they wait for you to answer your phone. Are you the type of person who would have Mozart or Metallica for your ring-back? Or maybe both, just at different times. All these are downloadable from the Internet—the ubiquitous cytoplasm of the 21st century that unites micro-organismic individuals to a larger cellular world.

Not only can cell phones do more, they are more. They are cameras, computers, phonebooks, video games, calculators, planners, alarm clocks, music players, and GPS systems—rechargeable

pocket-sized brains that have speed-dial and voice activation. My cell phone is everything that I am not: small, fast, organized, musical, reliable, good with numbers, always entertaining, never forgetful, always on-time, able to unlock the car when your keys are locked inside,⁴ and almost always located in a network while I almost always feel dislocated from my human networks.

We are obsessed with these gadgets. A decade ago there were about 34 million cell phone users in the United States; today there are more than 203 million users. Based on surveys taken in 2004, MIT declared the cell phone to be “the number one most hated invention, yet one we cannot live without”—it beat out the shaving razor, the microwave, the coffee pot, the computer, the vacuum cleaner, the television, and even the alarm clock. Americans are obsessed with their cells—borderline biological gadgets that we are scared to leave home without. When I place my cell phone in my pocket and receive a call, I can feel it vibrate like a strange muscle spasm inside my clothes, making me feel like a cyborg. The barriers between humans and machines break down. Now

4 For instructions on this clever trick of unlocking car doors with a cell phone, see http://www.ehow.com/how_2182577_unlock-car-cell-phone.html?ref=fuel&utm_source=yahoo&utm_medium=ssp&utm_campaign=yssp_art.

we collect outdated models of our cell phones to recycle⁵ and raise money for people in need—even soldiers.⁶

Cell phones have ensured their place in our world by making the landline obsolete. According to the 2008 CIA World Factbook, there are now a mere 163.2 million landlines in the US compared to 255 million mobile cellular lines—and growing. I saw this result firsthand when, to my roommate’s dismay, the managers of our apartment complex revoked the landline. But my roommate was ready to fight for her right to be cell phone-less. She tried to enlist support, petitions, protests, anything, but she found that she was one of only three cell phone-less people who lived in our apartment complex of about six hundred. My roommate was proud of her resistance to the great “evils” of the cell phone. She saw them as distracting, rude, worldly, and worst of all, germey. A landline phone wired to the wall, for the most part, stays in its place and is controllable; but a cell phone goes everywhere—in

5 Yes! It’s true! You too can recycle your old cell phone at <http://www.americancellphonedrive.org>

6 This charity, started by a couple of teenagers, uses the money collected from donated cell phones to buy phone cards for soldiers. Check it out at <http://www.cellphonesforsoldiers.com/about.html>.

every conceivable pocket, purse, or bag, in every hand-held situation. On occasion, my germaphobe roommate would need to borrow my cell phone and while wiping the phone furiously with a cloth would declare, “Cell phones are gross! You never know where that thing’s been!”⁷ After the landline ended, she finally bought herself a cell phone, and got a job to support the habit. Her boyfriend was delighted with her new purchase—he could finally hear her voice more often and track her daily movements. She bought a pink cell phone—her favorite color. But despite the aesthetic pleasure, she felt like one of her personal freedoms had been restricted.⁸

But despite the possible inhibitions or dangerous germs, I still feel safer when carrying a cell phone because in case of an emer-

7 She has a good point. I know at least two people who have admitted to accidentally dropping their cell phones in the toilet.

8 She still finds ways to assert freedom. Sometimes while painting, she turns her music up so loud that she can’t hear her phone ring when her boyfriend calls. Other times she forgets to turn the sound on after class, so she continues her errands while her boyfriend shows up at our apartment confused about why she isn’t returning his calls and why she isn’t at home. These instances have happened multiple times and it is still uncertain whether they are accidental or deliberate.

gency I can contact help in seconds. If I were to encounter, like my friend Christina, a naked man on my path to school, I could, like her, within seconds pull out my cell phone and call the police. The naked man might, as he did with her, just stand there in awkward shock as I hold my weapon-phone, and walk away. Disaster easily averted. Cell phones also keep detailed records of my calls. These records are useful if I ever want to contact someone or sue them for contacting me.

Cell phones also have the marvelous ability of bringing people together wherever they are—even if the cell phone users happen to be with other people at the time. This phenomenon takes place every single day, especially in between and during my classes. In one class particularly, I noticed that my friend Steve would always have his cell phone out during class and be texting while our professor lectured. When I asked him about it, he sheepishly admitted that he met a girl last week and they have been texting each other almost nonstop since they met. They soon started dating seriously—in person.

But even this valuable dating tool can be misused. My friend Mary was engaged to a wonderful man who seemingly turned bad

overnight. He broke off their engagement via text message. The breakup was hard enough, but the final insult was the fact that their close relationship was broken off by a terse “I can’t marry you” transmitted to a two-inch monitor. After the breakup, Mary said, “Even my fourteen-year-old little brother has better manners than that!”

So apparently there are manners and rules associated with cell phone use. Well, what are they? Is it appropriate to have loud phone conversations in crowded public spaces? Is it appropriate to answer a call during a meal? Perhaps it is best to leave this subject with “Text unto others as you would have them text unto you.” The code of cell phone conduct doesn’t come with the instruction manual. Perhaps it should.⁹

Maybe this is why we simultaneously love and despise our cell phones—they become more human while we become more robotic.

.-) ¹⁰

9 For the Ten Commandments of cell phone use, thou shalt please see <http://www.inforworld.com/articles/op/xml/00/05/26/000526opwireless.html>.

10 This is a person who can still smile despite losing an eyeball. It reminds

Last Saturday at the cell phone store in the mall, I asked the phone doctor what the diagnosis was.¹¹ He asked me two questions: “Did you get water on it?”

“No.”

“Did you drop it?”

“No.”

He scratched his chin, mumbled something about the “back room” and took my phone there where he ran x-rays and other medical tests on the patient. He finally emerged with my cell phone and said with grave seriousness, “I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“Have you ever seen this problem before?” I asked, as I stared at the vertical blue lines on the monitor.

“Never. Not with the monitor like that—with those lines...” he shook his head in dissatisfaction.

me of Ralph Waldo Emerson who wrote that he considered himself to be a “transparent eyeball.” If this particular emoticon disturbs you, just imagine that Emerson is the other eyeball.

11 Why is it that when we talk about our cell phones they never “break”, “stop working”, or “malfunction” they simply “die”? This is a rhetorical question—I’ll answer it for you. I think the answer is that we treat our cell phones like living bodily limbs. Whether this is beneficial or maleficial is still under discussion.

“What are my options?” I asked.

“Well, this isn’t covered under warranty and you’re not due for an upgrade for another six months. So you can either buy a new phone at retail price or pay \$50 for a replacement.” I forked over the fifty.

“Can you at least switch over my contacts from the old phone to the new phone?” He tried. It didn’t work. Another salesman tried it on another computer. It didn’t work. Every phone number that I had bothered to save in the past three years was eaten by the blue vertical lines.

As I walked out of the store and into the common area of the mall—typical Saturday shoppers strolling by—I realized with embarrassment that the only useful phone number I actually knew by memory was my own. I knew the former landline number of my apartment—now useless. I knew the landline number of my childhood home, but my family didn’t live there anymore. I knew my high school best friend’s landline phone number, but I hadn’t talked to her in over a year. While looking at the new white phone with its perky sounds and straight-from-the-store excitement, I felt ashamed. I could recite my social security number, my student

ID number; I could name every president of the United States in order of presidency; I could even recite the first fifteen lines of the Prologue of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in Middle English, but I didn't know the phone numbers of my family members and my closest friends. Those numbers weren't written anywhere in my possession. I thought they were safe on my phone. Yet the unexpected happened unexpectedly and my contact list went from over sixty people to zero in just under an hour.

=|:-)=¹²

You're going to hate me but I'm leaving Utah in the morning.

Knowing that I didn't know how to contact my friends, or recognize their numbers when they contacted me, this anonymous text message I received became vitally important. Was it for me? What if it wasn't for me?

I imagine a once-loving couple, now struggling to keep their love alive. Perhaps her name is Julie, and perhaps his name is Michael. One night, while the two are at the opera, tight-tuxedoed

12 Abe Lincoln.

and slinky-black-dressed, Michael's phone vibrates in his pocket. He takes out his phone and recognizes the caller. His eyes grow large; he turns to look at Julie who looks surprised and confused. "I have to go," he says, "I'll pick you up after the show." He stands up and walks out, rudely stepping over people in his row while the lead soprano performs an impressive aria. In desperation, Julie follows him outside.

"Michael, where are you going?" she cries, as she jogs up behind him and catches his arm.

"Julie, I'm sorry, but this is urgent. I...need to run an errand and I can't tell you what it is," he says as he alternates his gaze between Julie's green eyes and his cell phone's blue monitor.

"Michael, I'm sick of this. You're always disappearing when I want to spend time with you, and you never tell me why you leave or where you're going." Tears well up in her pretty green eyes.

"Julie, don't cry," he says as he puts his strong arms around her—cell phone still in hand. "I'll be back to pick you up after the show, I promise. I just need to pick up some stuff on the other side of town." He releases her and retains the cell phone as he starts walking toward the parking lot. "And when I get back, we'll go to

IHOP—how does that sound?” he calls out with a smile as he jogs toward the car leaving Julie on the steps of the opera house.

His directions are clear; he must pick up the stuff, then transport it to the next drop-off. Once on the correct street, he gets out of his car and walks toward the drop-off point. Suddenly, a man jumps out of the shadows and tackles Michael on the pavement. By the smell of pizza Michael knows it is Bill, the delivery boy who delivers pizza when he’s not peddling the stuff in used pizza boxes to his extra-late-night customers. “Bill, it’s me,” mumbles Michael, through Bill’s large, greasy hands.

“Shhhh,” hisses Bill. “They’re here.” He whispers, while pointing to a cop car concealed in a tree-lined driveway.

“So what do we do now?” whispers Michael.

“This was the last drop-off we had,” Bill responds. “We’ve gotta leave the state—tonight.”

As they drive away from the neighborhood, cop cars wailing and screeching behind, it is 9:24 pm. Bill drives—creatively—to the airport, and Michael pulls out his cell phone and dials, out of habit, Julie’s old cell phone number to send her a text message:

You’re going to hate me but I’m leaving Utah in the morning.

Okay, okay, highly improbable. But still, who sent me this text message and why? Was it from God? (I always knew God would choose to live in Oregon)¹³ Was it one of the fifty-or-so lost numbers that I was desperate to regain? Was it one of my friends from Oregon, who was living in Utah and going to school like me? Was it a person I knew from BYU who just happened to have an Oregon number? Either way, my anonymous friend was making a dramatic out-of-state move very quickly—why? Did they need my help? Why would I hate them? Maybe this text was not intended for Julie or me and it was just a wrong number altogether and I was never supposed to see it in the first place. Possibly. But...

After much deliberating, I finally texted back:

Who is this? all the numbers on my phone got erased

I didn't receive a response¹⁴

13 I saw this in a play recently—a character received a text message from God. I liked the idea, and I decided that I wouldn't mind at all if God sent me a text message every now and again. But maybe not this particular message, since I know a lot of people who would be very disappointed if God decided to leave Utah in the morning.

14 until about a week later.