

Second prize: The Phone, **Stephen Frame** (Thurso, Scotland)

He looked at it once and he wanted it. The dealer was at pains to point out the faded label on the base. "The provenance is sound," he said. "It's a Jydsk model. See here, this shows it was from the Hungarian embassy in Switzerland. The year is clear, 1944."

Mr Stielin touched it, a dark box from an age of darkness. An age that had gripped him like a narcotic, for his entire life. "So few care these days. About where we came from. What they endured for us."

The dealer clucked his agreement. "Not quite a century and a half and we forget. Maybe peace does that. Our lives are too easy, I think. We need reminding."

So Mr Stielin bought the telephone and took it home.

In an afternoon of spring sunshine, he saw to a myriad of small matters in his apartment. Plants needed watering, dust had to be rounded up, Italian opera to be listened to. He wore his contentment like a familiar coat, unnoticed.

The sound was a drawn out ring. *Bringgg!* That ended on a musical ding. *Bringgg!* It took Stielin long enough to realise *Bringgg!* the noise was in his apartment. *Bringgg!* His brow furrowed as he cast around for it's source. *Bringgg!* The kitchen? His puzzlement drew him on, *Bringgg!* at this intrusion, *Bringgg!* until he stood on the threshold.

The phone, the Jydsk, was ringing. Stielin peered at the braided cord that should connect it to a socket, that ended in two stumps of clipped copper. *Bringgg!* The body of the telephone vibrated with the strength of its bell, so loud in the small room. He struggled with the sound, it made no sense. Like finding a live fish flopping on your favourite armchair, like a column of water with no glass supporting it.

The ringing ceased and Stielin smiled to himself. You old fool. There must be a battery. Someone must have rigged the phone to ring, as a novelty. And it must have gone off by accident. Obvious really. As he wiped the sweat from his upper lip. Need to fetch a screwdriver and we'll get to the bottom of this particular puzzle...

The small screws gave way and he prised off the base plate. An old smell, a mix of Bakelite and metal, wafted up, as he stared at the innards of the phone. It had been gutted, eviscerated. It contained nothing but the knotted end of the cord. No bell, no workings. Slowly, very slowly, Stielin replaced the base then he pushed the phone as far away as the table edge would allow.

When it rang, he let out a yelp, as he shot to his feet, his chair toppling back to crash on the floor. It crashed unheeded, as he stared at the impossible thing on his kitchen table; as hackles raked up his neck and into his scalp. The phone rang on and on, with the mad insistence of a baying dog in the pitch dark of the night. Rubbing at his lips, Stielin hesitated; it shouldn't, can't do that. Wavered; you have to answer the phone when it rings. Leaned in; with hand outstretched.

The ringing stopped as his finger tips touched the receiver. He snatched his hand back, as though scorched, and pressed flesh to lips, circling the table where the phone squatted like a malicious idol. As his pulse slowed to a solid thump-bump. He peeled the fabric of his shirt from his back and tried to bottle up his fear. But it slid away from him in greasy coils.

Steady, old son, there's a good reason for this. A hoax. It's a hoax, somebody's rigged this as a prank. But who? Who would do that? In the murk of his mind, the truth was a lurking, half-glimpsed predator. Mr Stielin swallowed and faced it. There's something wrong with me. This is what a mental breakdown is like. I'm hallucinating this.

"I'm going mad," he said to the kitchen. "Off my head." Drawing strength for the sound of his own voice, he smiled. "I don't feel half bad for it."

The ringing started for a third time and he grabbed the handset, almost dropping it when a

woman's voice spoke. The language was foreign but the tone of 'Hello' was clear. He held the receiver further away from his ear than was entirely normal. "Who is this?" he asked.

"English? You speak English?" the voice said. "Is this the Hungarian Embassy in Bern? Who are you?"

"Ah ... my name is Stielin. I'm in London. Greenwich." He spoke without thinking, in the unguarded way that the telephone demands.

"London." The word was whispered out, all strength drained from the speaker's voice. "I am sorry. I thought -" A drawing in of breath. "I do not understand how I reached you. I am telephoning from army headquarters in Budapest. The Soviets are here, they have surrounded the city. On Christmas Day, of all days." The bitterness in her voice was flinted with anger.

"What Soviets? There are no Soviets." Stielin stopped himself. "Who are you and how are you doing this? It's not funny. Not in the least."

"My name is Anna. I was only..." The pleading note vanished. "I must go."

Stielin heard it. In her voice. Over her voice. The rising wail of the air raid siren. The deep percussion of high explosives. Her naked fear. The line went dead.

He lowered the handset and licked at paper dry lips. He knew without checking that the Red Army had invaded Hungary in the winter of 1944. The sounds on the phone, so real. If its a hoax, why fake that? Maybe I'm not going crazy. Maybe. This. This is real. How? I'm imagining it. But the thought took hold. It is real. This woman is alive.

The phone drilled out its brassy cadence again and Mr Stielin snatched at it. "Anna?"

"Yes? Wait. I recognise you. I spoke to you days ago. I was thinking of you, it is so strange that a German should be in London. Are you an envoy of some kind?"

"Ah, not as such," he replied. "Are you alright? I heard bombs, I think."

"There are always bombs. The Soviets push on. It is relentless. Every day since Christmas. The first day of the new year, I saw -"

His questions piled high and fast behind his tongue but the woman's voice stayed them. Her despair, so deep and cold, like black water. "Tell me," he said, "I'm listening."

"There is a dead horse in the street where I live. We share it, the few families that remain. We are neighbours, after all. It is all the food we have but we are fortunate it is so cold. I was sawing meat from it and a woman walked past. She was wearing a fur coat and walking her little dog. A Soviet patrol appeared. There is no front line here. One day, our street is secure, the next, it is not. Their commander spoke to the woman. His voice, it sounded like animals, not human. He shot the woman in the head, to get her coat without damaging it. Her little dog licked at her blood where she fell. The Soviet looked at me. He smiled and shrugged before leaving with his coat. I can feel myself breaking apart, piece by piece."

"Anna. Perhaps I can help."

Her reply was the sound of a soul condemned and acceptant of it. "I should not be doing this. I could be arrested. And you are far away. I cannot talk now." With a click, there was blank silence.

The air leaked out of Mr Stielin, as he slumped into his chair. After a moment, he asked his house to show him the Soviets and what they had done in the Hungarian capital on the Christian festival in 1944 and he read the horror of it, projected in the air in front of him. The dead. In their tens of thousands. The living. Starvation, disease. The rape of thousands of women and girls. Through his kitchen window, the sun cast its gentle light about him, on this warm afternoon. When the phone rang, he answered it with desperate speed. "Anna. You must listen carefully. I can help. I know what's going to happen there."

"Herr Stielin ..." Her voice faltered. "I hoped it would be you. I just wanted to to talk."

"Oh," he said.

"Just to talk to someone who is not surrounded by such death, it would be a comfort. How can you know what will happen?"

"I'll ... it's ... I'll show you. What's the date? Where you are?"

"January the fifth." Her answer was slow, puzzled.

Stielin scanned the text that still hung in the air in front of him. "January fifth," he breathed. "The Germans are trying to break the siege, they call it Operation Konrad and it started on New Year's Day. They will make two attempts but both will fail. They will abandon you to the Soviets on the twelfth of January. The city will surrender on the thirteenth of February."

There was pause before Anna spoke. "I hear the officers speaking of Konrad with some hope. Are you an intelligence officer? You will get in such trouble for saying these things."

"No. I'm no officer. I'm from – I'm in a position of some authority."

She laughed then, a girlish sound.

"What?" he said, smiling himself.

"There is only one authority with that kind of intelligence," she said. "I doubt it is you."

"I'm from your future. I can't explain how." It spilled out of him, like it wanted to be said. He waited, listening to the distant hum and crackle on the line.

"You are cruel. To say these things then say this lie." Then nothing. She had hung up.

As soon as he replaced the handset, the phone rang again. His arm jerked in reflex. "Anna?"

There was silence but he knew she was there. Faint sounds seeped through, other female voices, metallic clicks. He could hear her breathing. He could hear her deciding. "You were right," she said. "The German forces withdrew today. The twelfth of January, as you said. I took the message to the general myself." In her voice, there was something of the confessional. Guarded awe. Cloaked fear. "What are you, future man? Who sent you?"

"Nobody sent me. You telephoned. You called me."

"In the future?"

"Yes."

"What is the date? Where you are, Herr Stielin?"

"It's 2086. The sixth of May."

"This is so difficult to believe. I do not think I do believe."

"Didn't I get it right? About what happened?" Stielin wanted to reach out to her, to touch her.

"You did. My head knows this but my heart still doubts. Am I going to die? Do you know that?" The question struck at him, painful as a stab wound.

"I don't know." He scrolled the text in front of him. "I do know many people are going to die. And worse."

"Worse? How can it be worse?"

But he could not bring himself to talk to a woman of rape and violation. A new paragraph in the text caught his eye. He read faster. "Anna. There is a contact I can give you. A Swedish man called Wallenberg, he's helped thousands of your Jewish citizens escape. You can find him, but you must hurry. You only have days."

"The Jews." Her voice was as bitter as winter.

"What about them?"

"They always find a way out. They leave the rest of us to die. They care for nothing except themselves..."

Stielin lowered the handset from his ear. The tiny voice from it trailed off then asked a plaintive question. He opened his mouth to ask his own question. What? What am I going to ask her? Then, with infinite care, he laid the receiver in its cradle. Sitting back, he looked around his flat, crammed with his books and antiques from the 1930s and '40s. This is all the knowledge I

have. I always thought I knew them. I never thought that women would ... Is she a fascist? Or an ordinary telephonist who believes what she's told to believe? Someone who's scared witless. And I judged and sentenced her on the weight of a few words.

He wiped at his eyes. "What did I just do?"

"Anna," he whispered, "I'm sorry. Call back. Please."

But the phone stayed mute. He stretched and rose to make tea, with frequent glances over his shoulder. The kettle whistled its cheery note, the sun shone on and the phone didn't ring.

Come on, ring back. You must ring back. And the thought grew and grew in him. You really did imagine all of this. Ghosts don't speak from history.

When it rang, he moved so fast, spilled tea burning across his thighs. "Anna!" he said.

"Herr Stielin? You sound in pain."

"It's nothing. I'm fine," he squeezed out. "Tell me. Tell me what's going on?"

Her voice was light and happy. He smiled with her, trying to ignore his own scalded skin.

"Tonight we leave," she said. "There is a heavy fog. We will break out under its cover. It is the eleventh of February, I have cheated your prediction. I will be gone before the city falls."

"Don't do this." His bark silenced her. "Please don't." Softer now. "The fog will only save the first few. Thousands die, the Soviet rockets and guns find them. Stay and hide. You must hide from the Russians, at the end of a siege."

Silence.

"What is the future like? Where you are?" Anna said.

"What? Oh, it's sunny. I've just made tea."

"Tea. I would so like that. I need to go. The evacuation has been called. Good-bye, Herr Stielin."

The phone went dead. It never rang again.

Seconds dragged into minutes. Minutes wore into hours. Hours ground on through the day. Mr Stielin clutched at his faith. The voice had been real. She was real. Say it often enough and it becomes ridiculous. The past doesn't speak, it has no voice. You need to be afraid. There is something wrong with your mind. Something serious.

The chime of the door was unexpected, the letter delivered, more so. It was from a woman he didn't know, explaining the wish of a great grandmother. Be sure to send this note to this address on this exact day. The yellowed scrap of paper was as fragile as an autumn leaf in his hand. "I hid. I lived. Thank you. Anna."