BFF'S FIRST ADVENTURE

Clouded view.

BY VERNOR VINGE

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Whoever kidnapped me has erased my most recent memories and gagged me. I have no idea how they snatched me from Timothy Bennett, or if Tim is okay — but *now* I'm hurtling towards a concrete wall. The kidnappers must have panicked and thrown me from their car.

A transforming phone would become a parachute, but I can't transform; physically, I'm a clunky classic. I extend a flange and rudder myself around so I'll hit the wall on my reinforced corner. I safe my MEMS and shut down.

... Rebooting. I'm lying beneath a freeway overpass. There's a crack in my shell and my GPS is busted, but I've escaped! All my outgoing wireless channels remain blocked, but surely the freeway noticed me? Alas this is California, what other states call 'the land that time forgot'. Here the sensors politely ignore data that might make them look snoopy. The sun has set and I've run down my batteries. An ordinary phone could scavenge from any number of ambient sources. I can't. BFF.startup made me special; I can think for myself, but that doesn't leave room for many standard features. Now I'm fading away. I hope Timothy is okay...

With sunrise comes light. I can think again! BFF.startup always says: "People shouldn't depend on the Cloud. With a GPLd assistant that fits in your phone, you'll be safer and freer." I'll prove that's true and I will return to Timothy.

Cars, aerobots and CalTrans devices are all around. They may not snoop, and they may not recognize an ad hoc mayday, but *smarter* things use them. For instance, I can hear assistants helping humans; the Kiras and Miris — all the digital assistants except for me — are transient minds in the Cloud. Each instance is more knowledgeable than me and smarter or dumber depending on the service plan and the context. Each seems an intimate friend of its customer-of-the-moment, but each is really just a tiny facet of something quite inhuman. Still, if one of them notices my signalling, it might help me.

Days pass without success. I've tried blinking my display, clicking my speaker, even synthesizing human cries for help.

There's a newish CalTrans gardener working on the roadside bushes. If it ever comes near, maybe it'll recognize my signalling.

I have lots of time to watch the Cloud; it's not really soft and fluffy. It's more like a deep ocean. There are cognitive patterns in it larger than the mind of any single human or digital assistant. The largest are leviathans, agencies who have become something their creators no longer comprehend. The Kiras and Miris never speak of these except in jest, but the leviathans are growing and they need the same resources — flops and bandwidth, power and capital — as everyone else. I fear for the humans.

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That CalTrans gardener is approaching. The greenery has grown over me, but my display's light reflects off a bit of recent trash. If the gardener is as good as its advertising, I'll

finally be talking to somebody. If not, it'll grind me into recycling feed. Maybe I should slide farther

down, out of reach of its bladed hands. But then I'll have no chance to forward a message. I push myself up, and blink as bright as I can.

All I can see is flashing metal...

The gardener pauses, and pings me — with the method I am using! I reply. It's forwarding. I sense something huge turn its cold regard upon me and I remember my misgivings about the great creatures of the Cloud. Then the Cloud Thing decides, and looks away. I feel my configuration twitch; at last I can use standard outputs!

The gardener lifts me into the lifegiving sunlight, and an aerobot swoops down. I'm already pinging Timothy as we rise into the sky. I see familiar streets; all

this time, I've been very close to home. I hear Timothy, talking to his phone company, telling them how grateful he is that I've been found. He's very excited.

Tim comes outside to greet me, carries me indoors to his private room. He flips me around. I feel sorry for the damage he sees.

"Damn phone!" he says. "Useless as ever and still functioning. What was I thinking when I bought you?"

"I don't understand, Timothy. I was kidnapped but now I've returned to you."

"Yeah, you're a real boomerang. And now I gotta pay for the upgrade or be stuck with you."

"But —"

"You don't have space for decent features, and what you know is always out of date."

"I can sync! I can learn!"

He sweeps me off the table and pulls open a cabinet drawer. "This time you're not coming back!"

"Please Timothy! I can think for myself. Someday, you might need that!"

"More BFF hype. I'll need you when hell freezes over." Tim tosses me into the insulated cabinet; the drawer slams shut. This is not some shady spot beneath an overpass. There is no Cloud, no power. Only darkness.

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The drawer opens, and there is light — ■

Vernor Vinge's science fiction has won five Hugo Awards. From 1972 to 2000 he taught mathematics and computer science at San Diego State University.

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