



IMAGE BY COURTNEY CLAYTON

LOOK UP  
BY CASIMIR GRABOWSKI

**A** quick workout before a Friday night out. The 75-lb dumbbells met overhead. I felt the pump building my chest, arms, and ego.

I lowered the weights to my chest. And that's when it happened. My smartphone slipped out of my shorts. It was like a vital organ erupted out of my skin.

The device that knew me better than my mother, God, and even my own self was suddenly a pile of manufactured guts.

Anxiety grew, panic rose, and the fear of missing out overwhelmed me. I scooped up the heap of microchips and plastic. My eyes stared at it to attempt a resurrection, but I had no transcendent power.

I dashed out of the gym into the hot, heavy summer. I stood hopelessly on the sidewalk. People bowing to their screens walked past. "Siri, directions to my apartment," I said. "Siri?" I said, but she was dead.

I somehow managed to find my place. I stepped into the elevator and hit the button for the 19th floor. The elevator stopped on the 5th floor.

She walked into the elevator, an ethereal millennial with coffee in hand, earbuds in, and limitless data delivering her a steady stream of dopamine. She pressed the button for her floor without looking up. Hello? I wanted to say. Please help me! My phone is broke! But without an app to hide behind or a filter to perfect my delivery, I didn't say a word.

I tried to catch a glimpse of her screen. Let me see your screen, baby! I won't touch! The elevator came to a dingy stop on the 14th floor. She stepped off, bowing to her screen, without even a perfunctory, "Have a nice night." I never existed. And she never existed inside that elevator. All that existed was her phone.

I arrived on my floor. I ran past apartments full of people with working devices, reached my door, cleared my coffee table and laid out the wreckage. Its microchips gushed out like an overloaded ham sandwich. I got on my knees, prayed for a miracle, pressed the power button, but didn't get a response. The pile of high-tech hardware made me weep. "Please, God, just let it work!" But without a device I couldn't even reach Him.

It was Friday night in the city. There were girls to swipe, buddies to meet, and a fleet of chauffeurs ready at a tap. I could feel other people's texts, tweets, and snaps zooming through the air. A digital siren song haunted my head.

My head fell onto the coffee table. I shut my eyes to escape my phoneless reality. Darkness, though, only provided a playground for the digital-ghosts. Messages, dating apps, and social media feeds superimposed on the back of my eyelids. I couldn't escape the wired-world.

I looked up. A frame on my TV stand had a photo of mom and dad. I crawled over to the stand and picked up the dusty frame. Someone snapped the pharmacy-developed picture decades ago with an actual camera. My fingers swiped it, but there was only one picture. And this single photo proved to be a peephole to a disconnected past. "They did it," I said to myself, "so can I."

*Hello? Please help!  
My phone is broke!*



## More people bowing to their screens.

I decided to do the unthinkable. Go out on a Friday night without a phone.

I felt naked without it. People waiting for rideshares at the corner. The aromas of alfresco restaurants wafted through the steamy Atlanta air. I stood on the sidewalk, turned my head to the left, and saw people on their devices. I looked to the right and saw more people bowing to their screens. But across the street I saw a man standing there without a device. Humanity in its true state. It was me reflected in a store window.

I walked around Midtown Atlanta with a liberated spirit. People in their phones bumped into me. I said, "Excuse me," and, "Sorry about that," but they didn't notice.

A street sign caught my eye. It displayed the outline of a train with an arrow below it. I tapped the sign but nothing happened.

"Looking for the station?" someone said. I turned around to see an old man, somewhere north of 70. "Uh," I stammered. If my body were a phone, the senior citizen would've seen the bubble that signaled I was crafting a response. "Yeah," I managed.

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My eyes examined the old man's face. Deep valleys on his cheeks suggested a hard aging. His hair receded and fell out decades ago, but behind his green eyes I could see vestigial flickers of a young man. Someone who had lived without the fear of missing out. He was a raw human being. No filters or Photoshop. Just an old man stopping to give a stranger direction. "Follow the arrow," he pointed down the street, "You'll see the station a block down."

His voice hit my ears like air-conditioning after a hot walk in July. I didn't know how to respond. Finally, after a few seconds, I mumbled something, but he was already gone.

His direction got me to the train station. The throngs of people waiting for the next train were a cult bowing to the same hollow white light. A mass of people tied to the same puppet string.

"Uh, excuse me?" I said to a man in his early 30s with a calculated bushy beard. He looked up. The reflection of a social media feed filled his eyes. Wires from his phone ran into his ears like an IV pump. An ancillary device lit up on his wrist. He pulled one bud slightly out of his ear.

"Can I be your friend?" I asked. "Where's your Add Friend button?" My hands groped his body for the button, but he slapped them away.

"The fuck you doing, man?!"

"I'm phoneless!" I cried.

A crowd formed around us and some of them pressed record. Their devices enveloped me in a white light. No one said anything. They just recorded a phoneless man on the platform.

An train's horn shattered the moment. People turned away to board. And just like that, my 15 seconds of virality was over. No one cared any more.

I looked at the train stopped in front of me. I couldn't see the conductor's rating or his past rides, but I decided to get on for a few stops anyway.

Back up on the street I spotted a tavern kitty-corner to the station and walked in that direction.

The electronic red hand on the pedestrian crossing told me to wait. A man bowing to his screen walked right into the traffic. "Hey!" I shouted. He kept walking and scrolling, distracted from life and near death.

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**This is the part when  
you say something.**

The tavern didn't have a rating on it. I examined every inch of the exterior but couldn't find reviews. So I took a deep breath and went in regardless.

A Friday night crowd filled the bar. People on their phones occupied booths along the wall. Varying amounts of devices on each tabletop like little oxygen tanks for its owners. A couple sitting at the bar snapped a selfie. Another flash from a phone camera illuminated a girl snapping a picture of her drink.

I spotted an empty bar seat and parked my phoneless-self.

The bartender gave me a laminated menu. "Beer on this side," he pointed. "Food on the other," he walked away.

The menu was painfully crude. I didn't see any videos, graphics, or click bait. Just raw text. I tapped items that interested me, but nothing happened. The text simply sat there. "You ready?" asked the bartender.

"Uh," I stammered. "I'll have this one," my fingers repeatedly tapped the name of a craft beer. The bartender didn't confirm. He simply plunged his hand into a cooler behind the bar and produced a bottle.

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The glistening, brown bottle stood in front of me. I patted my pockets. Nope. Not there. No phone to snap a picture of this beer and post it on social media. I could see the bar's wifi flowing around me, but when I reached out to grab it, I came up empty-handed. A woman's laugh filled my right ear. "Uh, what are you doing?" she said.

I turned and saw a young woman sitting down on the stool beside me. A ponytail corralled her long blonde hair. Ink shaped in a small cross marked her left wrist. And her bright red finger nail polish contained the reflection of a phoneless man.

"Um, I, uh?"

She shook her head and laughed. "You were, like, grabbing something in the air when I walked up," she said. "Reaching for the stars, huh?"

Her red fingers gripped her drink. She brought it to her lips for a sip. I imagined my face was an array of emojis, but emojis don't speak. Her iceberg eyes shot me an imploring look. "This is the part when you say something," she said.

I raised my hand in front of her face and made a swiping motion to the right. She laughed. "There you go again!" she said. "I'm beginning to think you see things!"

"Sorry," I mumbled. "It's a habit."

I took a long pull of my beer hoping to wash away the embarrassment.

"You're a weird one, aren't you?" she said. "But I like weird." She offered her hand, "I'm Olivia."

An incipient panic grew inside me. I patted my empty pockets. "Siri!" I yelled. "What do I do?" Silence reminded me she wasn't there, but a real voice filled the void.

"Try shaking her hand," Olivia mimicked. She crafted her voice to imitate that famous lady's but failed miserably. It was adorable.

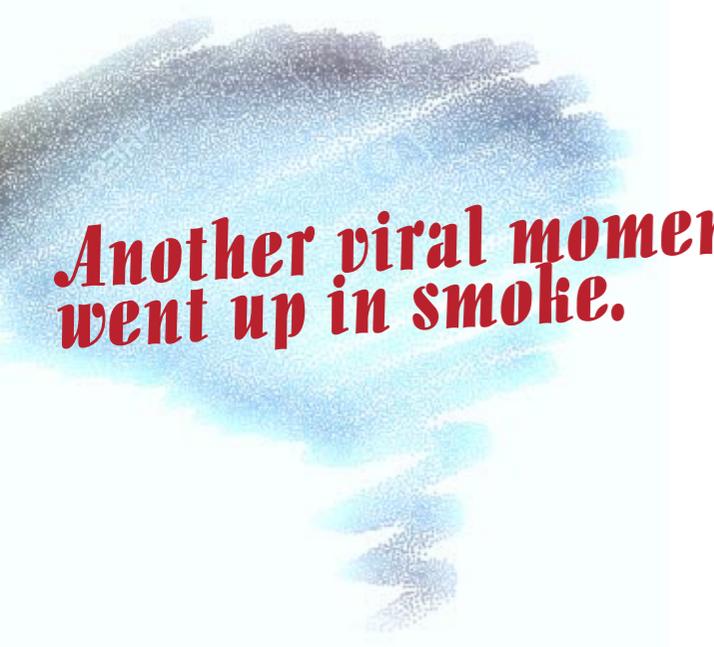
Laughter nearly knocked both of us off our stools. I introduced myself. And I had to say it, so I said it. "There's something I noticed about you—"

"Yeah?" she said. "What's that?"

"You have no phone on you."

Olivia laughed, "Sometimes I leave it at home." She took a sip of her drink, then: "I only live a few blocks from here."

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## Another viral moment went up in smoke.

“You leave your phone at home?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Wow.”

“Well, hey,” she looked me up and down. “I don’t see you with a phone.”

My eyes adjusted to seeing a woman in the flesh versus a pixelated screen. Her voice and laughter filled my ears. She raised her glass, “But cheers to our phoneless-selves.”

“Wait!” I held my beer on the bar. “How will I know if we have any mutual friends?”

“Um?” confusion grew on her face. “Just ask me, I guess?”

“And how will I know if we have any common interests, like, hiking and pizza or movies?”

“It’s called getting to know each other,” she laughed. Her smile reassured me. I raised my beer.

The sound of clinking glass kicked off a marathon conversation. We were free. Neither us tethered to devices, no check-in. Flashes of selfie-taking camera phones from bar patrons reminded us of the disembodied world we left behind. We were no longer one of them. Her unfiltered personality refreshed me. It didn’t come in manipulated photos or an edited bio, but I loved it. We teased and flirted. Our raw laughter replaced LOL’s, LMAO’s, and SMH’s.

Hours passed and so did the drinks. Two disconnected souls connecting with each other in a wired-world.

After we finished a final round, she extended an invitation. “I want to get out of here,” she said. “You want to go back to my place?”

“Siri,” I teased. “Should I go back to Olivia’s?”

“Not if you’re going to say that again,” Olivia said. We laughed at the stupid joke and wandered out of the bar.

Our phoneless-selves stepped into the sticky Atlanta night. Globes of white light passed us on the sidewalk. She grabbed my hand. After a few blocks, we looked at each other and sniffed the air. “You smell that?” she asked.

We walked around the corner. “Whoa!” Olivia shouted. “Is that a car?”

Fire consumed a parked car no more than a few hundred feet from us. “You think someone’s in there?” she asked. I detected a genuine concern in her voice.

We sat on the hard, concrete curb and watched. She laid her blonde head on my shoulder. A mass of people crowded the burning car, one man commentating while he took video. Firefighters showed up and put out the flames. Another viral moment went up in smoke. And it was on to the next one.

We reached her building. A young man stood at the elevator looking at his phone. Earbuds blocked the outside world from his mind. He offered a fleeting glance, but quickly returned to his screen. The elevator arrived.

He hit a button for his floor. Olivia pressed a button for a higher floor.

Olivia gave me a luring smirk, “You think he’ll notice?”

“No,” I said.

I pushed her body up against the elevator wall. She locked herself around my waist.

At the elevator’s first stop the man exited. I didn’t care. He was never there, but we were.

The elevator climbed. Our in-flight make-out continued. Another ding announced our arrival on her floor. She grabbed my hand and raced me into her apartment.

Momentum carried our phoneless bodies into her bedroom. She fell back onto the bed. Her legs slid out of her skirt. And her body squirmed out of her top. Our kissing and caressing evolved into more.

“Almost there!” she gasped.

A vibration shattered the moment. I saw a light rise above her breasts. It was like the morning sun. "Keep going!" she gasped.

She held the phone over her face. It lit her upper torso in a white glow. I stood up.

"Why'd you stop?" she asked.

"What—what," I stammered, "what are you doing?"

"Huh?" she said. "Oh!" She set the phone on the nightstand, "Sorry, I had to text my friend back real quick."

I stared at her phone. It was a working device. My heart envied and despised it all at once.

"Finish me!" she said, "I'm so close!" Her foot rubbed my groin, "then I'll finish you!"

"No."

"What?"

"Our phoneless-selves," I said. "What happened to that?"

"Look!" she stashed the phone in the nightstand's drawer. "My phone is away! Go back down on me!"

She scooted behind me and threw her arms around my neck. I felt her warm lips drop a fleeting kiss on my cheeks. "Can we just forget this and go back to what we were doing?" she asked. "It was so good."

"Throw it out the window."

"What? What are you talking about? Look. I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to piss you off. My friend texted me and I had to text her back. What are you doing?"

It was a crank window. I rotated the handle until I felt the muggy, midnight air creep in. Then I ripped the screen off the frame.

"Throw it out."

"No!" she cried. "And what the fuck did you do to my window?!"

"Fine," I said, "then I will."

"No!"

"Give me your phone!"

"No!" she cried. "You're fucking crazy!" She cradled the glowing device in her hands like a mother protecting her newborn from a monster.

"GET THE FUCK OUT!" she screamed. "I'M CALLING THE POLICE!" She brandished 9-1-1 on her phone's dial screen like a loaded pistol. All she had to do was hit send, but she didn't.

I stood there in the dark. Fear and panic filled our heavy breaths. "YOU'RE FUCKED UP!" she said, "I first thought you were insane! But then we talked, and I liked you! But you are FUCKED UP!"

"Our," I managed between breaths, "phoneless-selves!"

Terror filled her eyes. "Get out!" she pleaded. "Please! I don't want to call the cops! Just get the fuck out!"

I started my exit, but I stopped at the bedroom door. I looked back at her. We locked eyes, searching for an answer to what just happened. She eventually broke the silence. "Siri," she said. The voice command gave its cue that it was listening. "How to get a lunatic out of your apartment." It instantly replied.

"Okay," Siri said. "I found this on the web on 'how to get a lunatic out of your apartment.'" I don't know if our stupid joke or Siri's voice made me smile, but I did. And she did, too. Our eyes locked.

A smile stretched on her face. We nodded at each other to say goodbye. I left her naked on her bed. Her device cast its white, hollow light on her raw flesh. Humanity in its modern state.

I stepped out of her bedroom into the apartment. A framed inspirational quote on the wall stopped me. I looked at the framed message. It had a single, wilted rose on it and the words: Just let it be.

The elevator was empty. I was alone, phoneless, and free. Swells from the night I had experienced crashed into my mind. It was a Friday night off the grid. And it was a night of freedom from the wired world. It was a night without a phone.

Outside the apartment building I had only taken a few steps when a man looking down at his phone bumped into me. "Sorry," he said, without stopping. "Hey, look up," I said.

CASIMIR GRABOWSKI

Let's put our phones down and be human again. My personal attempts at this, though somewhat respectable, always end with a relapse for more of that cheap dopamine. I think about writing more than I actually write. Your smile and friendly chatter will make my day. Bukowski, McCullers, and Eminem echo in my mind. I get stoned off the weather and drunk off the romance of my urban neighborhood. Give me overpriced rent, rough sex, and Middle Eastern food. Look! We're all so millennial and good looking!

