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Vienna-born, Harvard-educated Arthur Oesterreicher resolved at the age of ten that he was going to write s.f. Only now, in his mid-twenties, has he finally got around to it, having been otherwise pre-occupied with various editorial jobs, with fiction for the better men's magazines, and with book reviews for the literary weeklies. His first venture into imaginative fiction is this neat, understated and chilling story of an unavoidable failure in communication.

Broken Circuit

by ARTHUR OESTERREICHER

THE WOMAN'S TELEPHONE VOICE WAS warm, inviting, friendly. "Welcome to the Greenfield Exchange. If you have any questions regarding your service, be sure to call the Business Office, Mondays through Fridays, between nine and five. Thank you."

There was a sharp click. John Gorham replaced the receiver and said to the installation man, "Sounds all right." Then he turned to his wife and asked, "Isn't it about time for dinner?"

The telephone man bowed faintly, a curious gesture which for a moment caught Gorham's eye: he stared at the carefully pressed overalls, the starched blue shirt, the peculiar little badge he wore on his cap. Gorham had never seen such a badge before; but then he was new in Florida, having just arrived the previous month after retiring

from his contracting business up North.

"Oh dear!" Mrs. Gorham cried. "The chicken's in the oven. I've got to run and look. Soup'll be on in a minute, John, so get ready."

"Goodby, Mr. Gorham," the telephone man said.

"So long now." He watched the man walk with soft slow steps to the door. His tool box seemed unusually large, Gorham thought; they didn't carry them that large up North. As the telephone man turned the doorknob he said, "I am sure you will enjoy your service."

"I'm sure we will," said Gorham.

"Dinner's ready!" announced Mrs. Gorham from the kitchen.

"Goodby," Gorham said. But the telephone man was already gone.

The first call came shortly after dinner.

"Hello?" It was an everyday kind of man's voice, but like no one Mrs. Gorham knew.

"Who is this?"

"Hello? Hello? Why aren't you answering? Hello? Answer, will you please?" the voice said.

"Are you sure you have the right number? This is Greenfield—"

The voice grew insistent, shrill. "Why aren't you answering? Please answer!"

"You must have the wrong number, mister," Mrs. Gorham said firmly.

She hung up the receiver, returned to her easy chair and picked up her knitting. John Gorham did not look up from his newspaper.

The second call came shortly after midnight. The Gorhams were watching *The Late Show* and beginning to yawn. When the phone rang Gorham wondered who it could be. "Almost bedtime," he said to his wife.

A woman's voice said sharply, "This is the Supervisor speaking. One of the clients has reported your failure to comply with the regulations of the Exchange. I must request an explanation."

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"Will you please answer, Mr. Gorham?"

"This is a new phone, operator. Just installed today. Probably something wrong with the—"

"Mr. Gorham!"

"I'll call the service people—"

"Will you please answer, Mr. Gorham?"

"Probably just a bad line—"

"Mr. Gorham, I hope you know what you're doing!" the woman shrieked. Then there was nothing but a faint, distant hum on the wire.

As he got into bed, John Gorham told his wife, "Remind me in the morning to get the man up here again. Blasted phone's out of order."

Mrs. Gorham was preparing breakfast when the third call came.

"You answer it, dear," she told her husband. "I've got to turn over the eggs."

Gorham yawned, wrapped his bathrobe around him and went to the phone. He could see that the weather outside was off to a gray, drizzly start, unusual weather for Florida.

"I hope you've changed your mind, Mr. Gorham." This time it was a child's voice, high-pitched yet soft. Gorham could not determine whether it belonged to a boy or a girl. It lisped as it said *Mister*.

"Who's this speaking, please? Phone doesn't work too—"

"Apparently you are still recalcitrant, Mr. Gorham. Probably you do not understand the full effects of your actions — or, more properly, inactions. You have disturbed the well-being of a considerable number of people who utilize this exchange. We cannot contact

one another so long as you choose to keep the circuit broken. We are cut off from our most profound source of nourishment, from our deepest means of communication." Except for the lispéd *s*'s the child's pronunciation was perfect and unhesitating. "There are hundreds of us on this exchange, Mr. Gorham, and we would like you to be one of us. But I plead with you: please reconsider! Or at least explain your motives, let us know the background to this unparalleled situation! Why have you cut yourself off from us? Please answer, I beg of you, Mr. Gorham—I beg of you!" Gorham wondered whether the child was going to burst into tears. What did they all want? The phone was out of order, that's all. . . .

"I can't help you, kid," Mr. Gorham began. "I don't know what you want but I can't help you. Sounds like a lot of tomfoolery anyway, calling folks this early in the morning to—"

"Please, Mr. Gorham," the child's voice said.

"—say fresh things like that? Didn't your daddy and mommy ever—"

"Oh God!" the child screamed. "Now I understand! You can't! You can't talk to us! *You don't know how!*"

"Well of all the—"

"Oh, this is terrible! You've broken the circuit and now it's too late!"

With a snort of anger Gorham slammed the receiver into its cradle.

"Breakfast is ready, dear," Mrs. Gorham called placidly.

"I'll call the company after breakfast," Gorham grunted as he began drinking his coffee.

But it *was* too late. The final phone call came as the Gorhams were buttering their toast.

Mr. Gorham's face turned slightly red as he walked to the telephone. He hesitated a moment before picking up the receiver. It was as if a voice were telling him something, warning him . . . He picked it up and held it to his ear.

A voice he had never heard before said quickly, "Are you ready? One! Two! Three! *All together!*"

Mr. and Mrs. Gorham tottered to the floor amidst a crash of glass which, the newspapers later reported, was heard as far away as the center of Miami. It was estimated that several hundred windows were smashed to bits within a half-mile radius of the Gorhams' house. But most terrible of all was the noise of the voice, the scream which seemed to come simultaneously from the lungs—and the souls—of several hundred men, women, and children. . . .

The Gorhams' death was attributed to heart failure and the blast to an experimental supersonic jet—an attribution confirmed by the customary denials, from Army,

Navy and Air Force, that any such plane was aloft.

The repairman with the peculiar badge and the oversized toolbox came to the Gorhams' house the next day and dismantled the telephone. He stuffed the receiver into the box and left, heading toward the center of the city. At the first traffic light he pulled a list from his trouser pocket, crossed off the Gorhams' name, and made a note; *Received signals but unable to reply*. He shrugged. It wasn't anyone's fault, really. Mistakes did happen.

When he got home that night

he picked up his telephone. Immediately, as always, they all felt his need and reacted to it together, as one. *It is sad but we are not to blame*, they all transmitted. *Do not be afraid the next time you try someone new. There are more of us and we must find them. . . .*

Thank you. Goodnight, the telephone man thought.

Goodnight, they all thought.

The next morning he called at the house of Mr. and Mrs. William Ross, in another part of the city. Everything went smoothly. They knew who he was as soon as he entered the door.