

To Michigan  
By Sarah Kerson

It started with the telephone.

This Scottish dude named Alexander Graham Bell invented it in 1876 or something. Back then they were pretty basic, just a part for listening and one to talk into. That's what I've heard, anyway. It's hard to know what's really true these days. But man, if only old Alex could see what they've done now. The poor guy is probably rolling in his grave. If his grave is still standing, anyway.

I have to wonder if he knew. If he understood how much of an effect his little talking machine would have on the world. Sometimes I fantasize about showing him around a Ruin. Show him what he really did that day when he put the finishing touches on what would eventually change the world forever. I'd probably start by showing him the Midwest Ruins, just to soften the blow. The coasts had the most Tech, of course, so they got hit the worst. They say the Midwest isn't even that bad. There's even a rumor of a colony in Michigan somewhere. It's just a rumor, but it's better than nothing.

That's where I'm headed now. Michigan. I don't have much to go off of, just bits and pieces of information. I picked up this old Tech Box in the Las Vegas Ruin -- man, you should see Vegas. It used to be this huge party town; there were lights and money and people everywhere. Now it's just empty.

Anyway, I found this Tech Box there. Sometimes when I fiddle with the knobs, I'll get a wave. That's how old this thing is; it's got *knobs*. It's practically ancient; it even has *batteries*. Man, before I picked up that Tech I couldn't even remember the last time I saw a battery. Every piece of Tech has them, of course, but only the older stuff had batteries you could actually take out to disable the device. They stopped making Tech like that a few years ago. Then they stopped making power buttons and on/off switches, and your Tech would just go to sleep when it needed to charge. No one missed the batteries or the buttons at first, but then things started to change. The Tech stopped needing sleep. It was everywhere. Your Tech knew everything there was to know about you: name, age, birthplace, voting record, criminal record, educational record, shopping record.... Everything. Then people started disappearing. At first it seemed like

a good thing: the criminals and the creeps went first. Then it was your friend's cousin's neighbor. Your dad's friend's wife. Your mom's uncle. Your brother.

But like I was saying, sometimes I get waves on this old Tech Box. Usually it's just dead air or static, but every so often I can make out a few words. Numbers, actually. They're always the same: "44 degrees, 53 minutes, 46 seconds North; 85 degrees, 59 minutes, 54 seconds West." I have no idea what the numbers mean, but I paid enough attention in geography class to know that they're coordinates. If I can get my hands on a map – a real, paper one, not a Tech one – it's the first thing I'm gonna look up.

"Look up," said a voice from behind the barrel of a shotgun. I was so shocked by the sound of another human voice that I practically jumped.

"Jeez, Adrian, don't scare the kid to death," said another voice. I'd been playing with my Tech Box, taking a break from walking to see if I could get another wave. I guess I got so enthralled in the Box that I didn't even notice the two women standing in front of me, one with a gun pointed in my face. Tech will do that to you.

"I... uh..." I tried to remember the last time I'd spoken to another person face to face. "How long have you been standing there?" I asked, looking up at the gun-wielding girl's face and raising a hand to block the setting sun.

"Long enough to know that even after all this," she said, gesturing to the empty Ruin around us, "you're still using a piece of Tech." She spat the word "Tech" out like it left a bad taste in her mouth.

"Look, it's way old!" I said defensively, wanting to point out that the gun she had staring me in the face was a piece of Tech too. "You can take out the batteries," I said, taking one out and holding it up so she could see. Adrian slowly lowered the gun and took the battery in her hand. She rolled it over in her palm, feeling the cold metal and examining it closely.

"Hey El," called Adrian. "Ellen! Come look at this," she said, motioning to the other woman standing behind her. She walked over to Adrian's side. "It's a battery," said Adrian in a quiet, almost astounded voice, handing the battery to her friend.

"No way," whispered Ellen. Then she turned to me. "Where did you pick this up, kid?"

"It was in this," I said, holding up the Tech Box. "I found it in a junkyard near the Vegas Ruin."

“You found a walkie-talkie?” asked Ellen excitedly, taking the Tech Box and fiddling with the knobs.

“A what?” Adrian and I said in unison.

“A walkie-talkie,” repeated Ellen. “It’s this old Tech people used to talk to each other, to send short-range messages,” she said. “Have you gotten any waves on this?” she asked me.

“Yeah, always the same set of coordinates: 44 degrees, 53 minutes, 46 seconds North; 85 degrees, 59 minutes, 54 seconds West,” I said.

“Coordinates?” Asked Adrian. “How do you know they’re coordinates?”

“I don’t know what else they would be,” I said.

Ellen handed me back the walkie-talkie and the battery and turned to Adrian. “The sun is setting,” she said. “We should make camp somewhere.” Then she turned to me. “You got a place nearby?”

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At first I was reluctant to show them my campsite, but after Adrian put down her gun I realized how much I missed talking to people. “Here we are,” I said, parting the branches that protected my makeshift home. “Home sweet home.”

“This is quite a nice little pad you got here, kid,” said Adrian. “How long have you been here?”

“Just a few days,” I said. I usually didn’t like to stay in one place for too long, but I’d been reluctant to cross the river.

“Is that a river I hear?” asked Ellen, walking through the small clearing that I’d settled.

“Yeah, I think it’s the Mississippi,” I said. “Listen, we should gather some firewood; it’s almost dark.”

Within the hour, we had a roaring fire and fresh squirrel that Adrian caught. I was still getting used to having people around, but I liked the company.

“So you’re a hunter?” I asked Adrian between bites of gamey meat.

“I am now,” she said. “My dad was way into guns when I was a kid. I hated them then, but now…” she held up her bit of squirrel. “It comes in handy.”

“I can only imagine,” I muttered, thinking of the barrel I’d come face to face with earlier that day. “So was the gun your dad’s?” I asked.

“A bit nosy, are we?”

“Adrian,” said Ellen pleadingly. “Be nice.”

Adrian scoffed. “No. I pulled it off some sucker in Salt Lake. Poor guy was so attached to his Tech he didn’t even know what day it was,” she said, staring into the fire. She spat out the word the same way she had before. “Even after all this, you’re still using a piece of Tech,” her voice rang in my ears.

We sat in silence for a while, listening to the river and the crickets and the wind. It had taken me a long time to get used to this kind of quiet. It was a deafening silence.

Then Ellen spoke. “Favorite Tech. Go,” she said, posing the question to Adrian and me.

The shadows on Adrian’s face cast by the flames turned her angry expression into a demented scowl. “*Favorite Tech?*” she repeated incredulously. “Don’t you realize that without all that – ”

“I know,” said Ellen. “But come on, you had to have had a favorite. Before,” she said. Adrian glared pleadingly at Ellen, as though she didn’t want to admit that she too had been dependant upon it.

“Mine was definitely my iPod,” I said. “I didn’t go anywhere without it. I can’t remember a day that went by without my headphones in.”

“I was the same way with my phone,” offered Ellen. “It had my whole life on it: Pictures, contacts, music, calendar... Everything,” she said.

There was a pause. Adrian had been whittling a stick with a pocketknife. “Mine was Fred,” she said.

“Fred?” I asked.

“Fred,” repeated Adrian. “He was my car. My best friend, actually. Always knew where to go, that Fred. But that’s all in the past now,” she sighed.

“Yeah,” I said, twiddling the dials on the walkie-talkie. “All in the past.” Just when I was going to put down the Tech Box, a static wave came through. It was a different voice than I remembered from the last time I’d heard it, but it still broadcasted the same message:

“44 degrees, 53 minutes, 46 seconds North; 85 degrees, 59 minutes, 54 seconds West,” it said. Adrian and Ellen, who had yet to hear the wave, nearly jumped at the sound of it.

“That’s it?” Adrian said. “That’s the wave you’ve been hearing?” I nodded. “What do you think the coordinates are?” she asked.

I paused. I wasn't sure if I should tell them about Michigan. Most rumors about colonies are just that – rumors. Hopeful stories survivors spread when they get desperate for something bigger than themselves. “Have you heard about the colony in Michigan?” I asked tentatively. Ellen and Adrian looked at each other, as if they too were deciding whether or not to share certain information about the colony with me.

“Yeah, we have,” said Adrian. “That’s why we’re heading west.” My heart was pounding. The only other person I’d ever told about Michigan was my brother. That was three days before he disappeared.

We spent the rest of the night in relative silence, waiting for the fire to die down so we could go to bed. Just as the last embers were burning out, Ellen got out three cups and a jug with some dark liquid in it out of her backpack. “I’ve been trying to make juice with berries that I find,” she said, pouring each of us a glass. I looked down at the purple sludge skeptically, but was grateful to have something to drink besides dirty river water.

I raised my glass. “To Michigan,” I said.

“To Michigan,” said Adrian.

“To Michigan,” said Ellen.