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The Voice of America

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The Voice of America

Pop hit Mom. I heard it, then I heard Mom. She yelled. She started to cry. I unplugged my earphones from my shortwave radio and came out of my room, blinking in the bright light of the kitchen. Mom was sitting at the table and Pop--Wade Eggers--was leaning over her. I went up to him and hammered him. I nailed him. He went down in slow motion, like a swamped boat. I still had my earphones on. I started to kick him but Mom said "Don't, honey," real loud, in that voice of hers that makes you think Jesus is in the next room, watching. So I quit. I had no great hate for him. I had no feeling for any of them. By "them" I mean the men she picked out for herself. I was just sick and tired of it. "It" meaning her life and what she dragged along behind it, me included. If I had some dynamite just then I probably would have lit it. In my mind I have burned that house in National City down to the foundation a thousand times, everyone asleep inside. I dreamed of waking up as someone else, in a different place, where things were decent. "Good bye, forever," I said. I meant it this time.

Mom was drunker than Pop. She got up and went into the living room. I followed her. Blood hung on her lip like a dark red grape. A drop fell onto her carpet. She always said she loved that carpet. It was a fake oriental made in Mexico. "I'm gone," I said. I kicked the television. It was a big cherrywood Packard Bell with a twelve inch screen. A clay penguin on top fell off and broke, but Sid Caesar on the screen didn't flicker.

"I don't want you to leave," she said. "Where can you go, honey?"

I picked up the Packard Bell and let it drop. I looked around for something else to pick up and drop. The china cupboard.

"Stop it!" she yelled. She held one hand up to her face. "Stop it!" Her fingers trembled, like she had taken all she could. But I had seen all this before many times. There was no end to what she could take. That's how it seemed. It was an act. Everything is an act.

I went back into the kitchen. Pop had pulled a bread knife out of a drawer. That made me blow up. I hit him as hard as I had ever hit anyone. This time he flopped when he went down. His eyes rolled up showing the whites. His mossy tongue hung out. I put my hands around my mouth and called down to him, like he was in a hole. "Pop, I'll hurt you this time, I mean it," I said.

To show I was serious I kicked his gut. I walked on him. He started arching his back and waving his arms so as to call me off. I picked him up by his shirt and slammed him a few times

on the wall. His head bounced. During all this I still had my earphones on. "Stop it, baby!" Mom yelled. "You'll kill him!"

In my earphones her yelling sounded like so much whimpering music. Let her whimper to Jesus, I thought, as I drummed the wall with Pop. I thought about all the times--when I was younger--how I cried in my bed while she and whatever man she had at the time fought and yelled, sometimes with strangers they had brought into our house. I would put on my war surplus earphones with the big rubber pads and plug them into my war surplus BC-348 shortwave receiver and try to pick up the Voice of America. But I could hear them right through the Voice of America.

I thought, as I slammed Pop, about the many times I had sat alone in a car outside some bar in Enid, Oklahoma, Fort Worth, Texas, Bakersfield, California or Tijauna, Mexico. I thought about the motel and hotel rooms I had slept in as a child waiting for someone to come for me while a world of strangers cursed and cried in the hallways and small rooms above and below and to all sides. These things are not so terrible--I have heard of worse--but they add up after a while and you learn to hate them. We had no real home and the stink of liquor and the noise of their lives was something I always ached to get away from. But leaving isn't easy. There are things you have to think about. Mom married Wade when I was thirteen. He was her fourth husband, if I have counted correctly. None of them was any good. Wade was the worst. I had seen him pick up a knife before, though he never had guts enough to use it.

I went back into my room. The yellowish glow of the dials on the BC-348 looked like two sour smiles. I plugged my earphones back in and searched around for the Voice of America. I loved to listen to the Voice of America. You could listen to all your favorite radio programs as they were broadcast across the oceans to Communist countries so that the people who lived in them could hear how it was to live in the Land of the Free. Jack Benny, Duffy's Tavern, Truth or Consequences, Counterspies, The Great Gildersleeve, and so on. I had copper wire strung out to the eucalyptus tree in the back yard for good reception. I found the Voice of America in the thirty-one meter band, but they just had Walter Winchell on or somebody like that with the latest bad news.

"I don't want you to go, baby," Mom said. She had come into my room. She stood behind me and my radio equipment. She lifted one earphone away from my head so I could hear her. Then she put her hands on me. I shook her off. She was so stupid with booze she didn't know how to act. She hardly ever knew how to act. Some people just aren't ready for the world from the time they are born. She is one of them. This had to be the tenth time she begged me not to leave.

"I'm going anyway," I said. I was seventeen, almost eighteen, and big. I had talked to a Marine recruiting sergeant. Korea was still going on. They needed men. I lifted weights at my friend Dick Drummond's house. I could military press two hundred and dead lift three. I was ready. To leave her behind.

She put her hand on my bicep which I hardened. "I'd be here alone with him if you went away, honey," she said, squeezing around on my arm as if looking for soft spots.

I took off the earphones and turned around. "That's your problem," I said. "Leave him, if you don't want to take that crap," I said.

"You know I've stayed with him for your sake, baby," she said. "Baby, you *know* that's the only reason I've stuck it out. I wanted you to have a home."

This was too stupid for words. But I had heard it before and was tired of telling her how stupid it was. It was worse than stupid. It was a lie. This was a lie that she believed herself. How people could lie to themselves, and *believe* it, was the miracle of human life as far as I was concerned. I'd seen her do it, I'd seen Wade Eggers do it. I have seen others do it since. If you need to believe something bad enough, you *do*. She sat down on my bed and started crying again. "You could be like Jesus," she said. "Any boy could, if he wants to let it out, if he isn't too scared." This was booze talking. Her Jesus talk made me want to hit her. I got up and left the room.

Pop was puking into the kitchen sink. The kitchen was heavy with the stink of bourbon-puke. She could really pick the winners. I went into their bedroom and took the keys to the Pontiac off the dresser. Then I went out to the car and unlocked it. Pop, at the kitchen window, saw what I was up to. He rapped the glass with a knife. He came stumbling out of the house.

"Don't you dare touch my car," he said.

"Go to hell, you goddamned Communist," I said, ramming the gear lever into first and spraying gravel.

I don't know why I called him Communist. He considered himself self-educated and had a superior attitude. He read books and when he came to a good part he'd read it out loud, no matter who was there or whether or not they cared about the good parts. Pop drove a sandwich and coffee truck and parked it outside the gates of defense plants at lunch time and at shift changes. That's how he made his living. It gave him a lot of time to read books. On the Voice of America, Walter Winchell said the Communists were in high places, getting ready to take over the country. They wanted to change how we thought. They had sneaky ways to do this and so you had to keep your guard up. Watch out for those teachers and professors who say things that downgrade our nation.

I didn't worry about it. I figured my teachers were too stupid to be Communists. But Pop wasn't stupid. He'd put on his F.W. Woolworth reading glasses and say things like, "Jesus Christ was not the son of God. He was just a good magician. He fooled the gullible with slight-of-hand tricks and with hypnotic spells. Just add him to your list of ego-maniac Jews." Mom hated this type of talk since she was religious, or at least she believed in God and Jesus, and that it was bad luck to bad-mouth them. Pop devilled her for fun.

I drove over to Dick Drummond's house. It was still early enough for him to be up, though his folks were in bed. I honked the horn in his driveway, two longs and two shorts, so he'd know it was me. He came down in about a minute.

"What's happening, Shit-hook," he said. Dick was a wise ass. He got in the car and the first thing he did was switch on the radio. He searched around until he found the L.A. station that played nothing but R and B, which you could not find on a local station. Local DJs thought Johnny Ray was as cool as it got. They thought Les Paul and Mary Ford were hip.

I burned rubber coming out of his driveway and caught a yard of second gear rubber in the street. Dick whistled, but he was being a wise ass. Dick had his chopped deuce coupe with a full-race '51 Merc engine in it and he could lay a mile of high gear rubber shifting up from second doing sixty. So a 1949 Pontiac with a low compression six didn't exactly impress him even though I was pretty good at nailing second with a speedshift.

"Check the mirror, Dad," he said. "I think you left the transmission in the road." Coming from Dick Drummond this was a compliment. Dick was tall and lean. He could bench press a ton but he couldn't clean-and-jerk worth spit. No legs.

I headed out to the beaches. Dick had the radio turned up full blast. Lloyd Price was singing "Mail Man, Mail Man." We were on a dark street in Pacific Beach. Dick said, "Stop here a second, Dad." I pulled the car over to the curb. Dick got out and walked over to the store front. He raised his foot, then looked at me with a comical expression on his face. Dick could be a bad actor. I knew he could do it if he was in the mood. He was wearing engineer boots. I shrugged. He straightened his leg into the window and it bowed in then exploded. Dick danced back from the falling glass. Then he reached into the window and picked up a suitcase. He carried it to the car and threw it into the back seat. I popped the clutch, laid yards of rubber, speed-shifted into second, caught another yard of rubber. I hit third with another speed-shift but there wasn't any top-end power left and the Pontiac just wobbled a little and flattened out.

Up in LaJolla where all the bankers and doctors live, Dick had me drive alongside parked cars, real slow, while he reached out of his window with a jack handle and knocked off side mirrors and punched holes into windows. I saw a kid's bike lying out on a sidewalk. I hopped the curb and mashed it. Dick laughed.

Back down in Mission Beach we picked up a couple of girls. They were gang-girls who'd been dumped. Their hands were tattooed. Dick had Julia and I had Inez. We drove up to Torrey Pines and found a dark spot looking over the moonlit ocean. On the radio: Earl Bostick playing "Flamingo." It was real romantic, and Dick had Julia's pants off in half a minute, but I had too much on my mind for it. Inez said, "What's wrong, mon? You feeling out of it, baby? No quieres nookie, mon?" She was good-looking enough, but I didn't feel like it. She was in my lap. Her breath burned my eyes. I turned the radio dial looking for more L.A. R and B stations.

We drove the girls back to Mission Beach then headed home. We didn't talk. We listened to music.

"You okay, Dad?" Dick said when I let him off. "That was fine muff, man. You missed some choice muff."

I shrugged. I backed out of his driveway and headed home. Two blocks down the street I caught high gear rubber by floorboarding the fat Pontiac for a full three or four seconds before I popped the clutch. There was a gravel patch on the street. I slid. The rear fender hit a parked car. This made me laugh. I drove home laughing, tears on my face, singing like Lloyd Price.

It was late, almost morning. I let myself in through the back way and went to my room. I felt ripped, like I'd been into the wine. I turned on the BC-348 and looked for The Voice of America. It was lost in static, on every band. Then I found an American-sounding announcer saying how the Chinese were kicking the Americans out of Korea and how cities in the U.S.A. were full of crime and how the whites hated the Negroes. It was Radio Moscow. I gave Radio Moscow the finger through the glow of the dials. Then I went to bed.

"Jesus planned this out," Mom was saying. She was sitting on my bed. The sun was up. She'd been talking, thinking that I was awake even though my eyes were closed.

"What?" I said.

"He's gone, honey," she said. "Pop. He left an hour ago. He's not coming back." She dabbed a tear out of the corner of her eye. "He was destined to stay four years three months, and now he's gone. I believe Jesus had this in mind for me."

My hand was sore. I looked at it. It had swollen up and the knuckles were raw and blue. I wondered what he had in store for me. I didn't believe there was anything in store for anyone. People just let themselves believe any bullshit that makes things easier for them. I said it before: this amazes me.

"Oh God, you gave him a terrific wallop, honey," she said.

"He's gone?" I said.

"I've never seen a terrific wallop like that."

"You mean he's not coming home tonight?"

She sneered, and for a second, though everyone always said she was a very pretty woman, she looked ugly. Then she smiled and was pretty again. "Not tonight, not any night. He's gone." She picked up my hand and kissed it. Her lips lingered on each battered knuckle as if to heal it. "I'll make you a nice breakfast, baby," she said.

Breakfast sounded good. It had been a long night. I was hungry.

Rick DeMarinis