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## Afterlife

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## AFTERLIFE

### HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLF

Some are so lonely and bored they'll talk all night, during the songs and commercial breaks. They put you on hold as they cue the next song. Others will chat for a few minutes, ask if you have a request, and then let you go. "I'll let you go now," they say, as though they're doing you a favor. I hate it when they say that. Their voices just kind of click closed, and you're done. I never call them back after they say that. Lately there's Mike Sharply at 99.6 to talk to. It's adult contemporary, but we established early on that we both prefer New Wave. "You can't be too picky in this job market, though," he says. I'm 14, so I picture an actual market—stalls set up with carts full of watermelons, zucchini. But I know that's not what he means. Mike will talk for three, four hours, sometimes longer. His shift is ten to six. He says he gets so bored, alone in the dark studio. He says he'd rather be a morning guy, or an evening commute guy—they make the big money—but you can't be too picky, you can't be too picky. Now it's three a.m. and I'm sitting at my desk chair in my nightgown, my hot ear pressed to the phone while he cues up Duran Duran, the numbers of the clock radio casting a greenish light in my room. Outside, the parking lot is filling up with snow. In a couple of hours the plow will come with its turning yellow light, the sound of grinding and growling that will wake me, briefly, from light sleep.

### WHEN DOVES CRY

During the day I doze when I can, sometimes through lunch, sometimes for a few minutes in the commons, my head on my chemistry book. High school is a kind of zombie colony: we all walk around in an exhausted, clumsy shuffle, choosing brief encounters with unconsciousness over American History whenever we can get away with it. When I get home from school I sleep until dinner time. During the day I'm never not tired. But even when I make up my mind to be like the girls in *Seventeen Magazine*, getting a good night's sleep and eating breakfast—all waffles and bright red fake-looking strawberries, like in the photographs—I'm wide awake at midnight, ready to try to figure something out, or at least talk to someone on the phone about stupid things. Like times they climbed the spire of Westminster Presbyterian Church—because most of these guys are from this same dumb little city I live in now, and that spire is legend. I like to hear about what they were like when they were my age. Their stories

sound like someone's idea of what being a teenager is supposed to be: parties and drinking and laughter, but no loneliness, no weird feelings of inadequacy or unexplainable longings. No staying up all night talking to strange men on the phone. I'm certain these guys wouldn't have been my friends if I'd been in school with them, but now they, some of them, will tether themselves to my calls like their last chance at human connection.

#### THE GLAMOROUS LIFE

Mike Sharply has a philosophical bent, and I like that about him. Or maybe he's just teasing me, because during our first conversation I asked him if he believed in any specific afterlife.

"Maddie!" He says when I call. "Tell me the meaning of existence, darling." Sheila E. is on, some horrible thing.

"Life is but Life! And Death, but Death!" I say. We've been reading Emily Dickinson in English class.

"Hold that thought," he says, and goes on the air to announce a t-shirt giveaway to the tenth caller. Only three people call, though, so he tells me, "guess what? You win again!" I have a drawer full of "WVIK 99.6 FM: The Viking!" t-shirts. I think maybe someday I'll go to Haiti or something, do relief work, give all my t-shirts to the poor.

"I learned something today," I say. "Did you know that radio waves go on forever?" I'm fibbing a little: I actually learned that in the fourth grade.

"You bet," Mike Sharply says. "Right about now my sign-on is probably almost to the moon. J.E.K.'s assassination? Probably out near Pluto, by now. At least."

"Isn't that a lot of pressure?" I say, "doesn't it make you feel like everything you say has to be really good, since it will never disappear?"

"Name one thing that *does* disappear," he says, "I mean in the grand scheme of things."

"Name one other thing that doesn't," I say.

"Same difference," he says.

#### I WEAR MY SUNGLASSES AT NIGHT

In English class we learn about metaphysics: how the spiritual inhabits the material world. I think the radio and the telephone are both metaphysical instruments, carrying the transparent freight of disembodied voices and every idea or sigh they express through cables and tubes. Sometimes when I'm talking to Mike Sharply I close my eyes, and inside my head I see his words as colors and shapes, an abstract painting of light and darkness that might be the very image of his soul being transferred into my consciousness. This is not something I tell him about.

"You should come to the station sometime," he says. "I'll give you a tour." This is not something I will ever do because, for one thing, I've told him I'm 17, and I don't actually even look my true age. I'm short and I wear braces and people still ask me if I'm under 12 and eligible for the kids' rate when I go to the movies.

"Or," he says, "come to one of our softball games. We play the 95.3 WIZ guys sometimes. I could give you a ride home." It occurs to me it's possible he thinks, when I ask him about the afterlife, that it's a weird kind of flirting.

Sometimes Mike Sharply lets me speak on the radio—just to announce the next song or say the station's call letters. He says I have a good voice for radio—"a rich alto." I like to have the space of a couple of songs to practice during, though. It's important to me to not mess it up. You never know whom it might reach.

#### OWNER OF A LONELY HEART

I don't know, I probably don't entirely understand the concept, but it seems like once you start thinking about metaphysics it's hard not to look at everything as embodied soul. The snowflakes falling under the streetlamp like little scrambled-static bits of prayers, trees and stones and especially the things we've made: flags and bricks and spaceships. All things containing peoples' thoughts and wishes, and maybe even something divine. Sometimes I wonder if my older brother ever had a chance to talk on the radio, before he died two years ago. I would like to think that his voice is out there somewhere, breaking wave-like against the shore of Neptune, maybe, then carrying on farther still. But then I think we're all just made up of tiny invisible collage-pieces of something, and the collage-pieces are always shifting around anyway, making space for others little-by-little or sometimes all at once. Not really going away, just shifting to a different part of the design. So then just looking at a rock or reading a book or listening to the wind is the same as hearing my brother's voice or seeing his face again: it's just that the pieces are put together differently, not in a way that's entirely recognizable as "his voice," or "his face," but still containing the same elements. At least that's what I sometimes think.

#### I CAN DREAM ABOUT YOU

Mike Sharply has gotten his wish: he's the new evening commute guy at 95.3: The Wiz. Tonight is his last overnight show, and already I feel the gaping maw of late night loneliness closing around me. It took me a long time to find someone who would listen, a lot of hours moving incrementally up and down the clock radio dial and making phone calls. He tells me how much more money he'll be making, how much more interesting it will be: afternoon commute

guys aren't all alone in the booth like he is, there are producers and guests and sound-effect guys, visitors to the station, sometimes even whole grade school classes come through on fieldtrips. He'll have more control over the programming, too. I ask what that means.

"Contests and shit, baby. Giveaways! Plus the music library over there is better." Already he's talking differently, I think. I can hear the manic buzz of the commute in his voice.

"Don't forget to keep in touch," he says, and gives me The Wiz's phone number. "Call any time. I'll always play your requests."

"Yeah," I say. "I'll be sure to listen during my evening commute," and he belly laughs. He's already crossed over.

#### MISS ME BLIND

I do call Mike Sharply a few times on his new show, but he's so busy with all the guests and producers and fieldtrippers he can only ever talk for a few minutes. "What do you want to hear," he asks, but he's forgotten that The Wiz is too jangly-pop for my taste, too mired in smooth vocals and insipid hooks. Once he even tries to give me a t-shirt, but I decline, and tell him to give it to the next caller.

Meanwhile, the new guy on the night shift at 99.6 is Dave Sanderson. He's got a nice voice: the color of plums, I think. A good sense of humor and a kind manner with callers. I wait a while to call him, myself: I listen for a few nights, trying to decide if he's worth my while, and if he's likely to want to talk about the things that interest me. Rejection is painful. Then one night, cueing up the latest by The Romantics, he accidentally calls the song "Sleeping in Your Talk," and laughs. "Man, I hate to make mistakes on the radio," he says. "Radio waves go on forever."

I call him up and we talk about music and the weather—it's January, and unseasonably warm, the ice on the municipal skating pond crazing and breaking—and how some people think the overnight shift sucks, but he feels lucky to have landed it: he's just out of college. I close my eyes and listen to him speak: his voice is purple, indigo, deep red, and makes shapes inside my head. Sometimes they almost seem to form something concrete, unite into something whole and real—something recognizable—but then they shift again, and drift back into whatever darkness they came from.