

Transmission

2150 words

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‘Here’s another one for you,’ I said to Cheryl. ‘It involves Janice Joplin.’

Cheryl was a disc jockey at a small radio station in Point Reyes. My band had played one of those free outdoor ‘backyard’ concerts that indie stations host sometimes. Cheryl was on the mic as the MC.

‘If it’s a complicated story like the one you just finished,’ she said, ‘I really need to get ready for my shift’.

Her shift was 10 to 3am, five nights a week. The station’s signal was weak, but an enterprising PR person had given Cheryl’s show traction on the internet and the show developed a bit of a cult following.

Cheryl’s gimmick was, starting at midnight she took song requests from callers that included dedications. So a caller from the middle of Indiana someplace could request ‘Walkin’ Away’ by Clint Black and dedicate it to her high school boyfriend Henry, from when they once swayed to it at the school dance.

Cheryl sometimes got emotional as she delivered the dedication over the airwaves. Her show wasn't unique--there were mainstream late-night radio shows that did the same thing--but you could see how listeners and callers felt close to Cheryl.

What propelled the show further was an incident that got covered in *People Magazine*. Sometimes callers were looking for ones they let slip away.

A caller from New Hampshire named Nicholas told Cheryl that in 1977 his parents sent him to an adventure summer camp near Yellowstone. The first session ended after a month, but he and a couple other kids were there for both sessions.

So on the in-between day a counselor took them to a rodeo in Cody, Wyoming. Before the rodeo got started Nicholas was checking out the rodeo stock in the pens and met a girl named Jace.

In the ten minutes they had, they hit it off, the way you do back then. Where you think it's a big deal until you get older and start dating real people. But Nicholas could never shake those ten minutes with Jace.

And of course it wasn't like today where they might have whipped out their phones and exchanged information. And it may not have gotten to that point

anyway. Nicholas remembered he and Jace commented on the animals and she asked if he'd been to a rodeo before and he said no, what about you, and she said two.

Nicholas had been 12 years old and now he was 54 and still living in his hometown. And life had dealt him a couple of setbacks, he explained to Cheryl, and this is a needle in a haystack, but there you have it.

Cheryl put it out there and Nicholas was real excited for a few days and nothing happened, and that was that, no surprise. But three weeks later someone in Jace's orbit heard about it, and her brother cautiously contacted the station on her behalf.

After some tentative back and forth, Nicholas and Jace met at a waterpark in Florida, and they got married a year later. The *People* article said they were both on the rebound from failed relationships, and had 'finally come full-circle'. There was a photo of them at a rodeo--not in Cody, Wyoming--the timing didn't work--but in Dallas.

I read the *People* article in the lobby of the radio station an hour before we played our gig. Up to then I didn't know much about Cheryl or the show. I tuned in the station occasionally during the day when I was driving on Highway 1.

I told Cheryl it was quite a success story, who would have thunk, out of this bare-bones operation--and she said stick around a while and *take in* the show if you like.

I wasn't sure how to read that, but I figured stay until the dedications started, why not. The 6 to 10pm host gave Cheryl a hug and said goodnight, and Cheryl took over the small studio. She greeted the audience and opened the show. At one time in the radio business you'd have an engineer sitting across from the DJ, but now Cheryl and the others handled the board themselves.

The only other person on the premises was the night security guard, an old guy who probably weighed 140 pounds and spent most of the time outside smoking.

There was one office in the place, for the station manager, and the door was open and I noticed a big beat-up recliner in there . . . which wouldn't seem to hurt anything.

One wall of the office was solid glass and you could see into the DJ booth and there was a speaker that piped in Cheryl's gig, and dang the thing was comfy . . . and I sat back and flipped through a couple of broadcast industry journals, and pretty soon was out like a light.

‘How’d you enjoy the show?’ I heard Cheryl say, sounding pissed off.

It was 3am. I popped up, embarrassed, and told her it started off good and then I lost the script a bit.

‘Yes unfortunately,’ she said. ‘Listen, I have to go. That story you were starting to tell me, some other time then.’

I agreed, it might have to wait. ‘You have to go *where?*’ I said.

‘Why?’

‘No reason, I’ve always been curious about the routines of overnight shift people. Do they go home and have a cocktail, watch the morning news? Then have dinner and so forth? Or it’s more haphazard.’

She said, ‘You do tend to master the 24-hour restaurants. At least in the safe areas. I used to live in Oakland.’

‘No don’t live in Oakland.’

‘I suppose you can join me. You don’t look like a threat. You know the old Lyon’s on Drake past Fairfax? It’s Bertie’s now.’

‘Yeah. You have a bacon and eggs and coffee type deal? Or would that be reversing everything?’

‘You’re starting to get boring, I’m thinking.’

‘But I intrigued you enough with the Janis Joplin tease.’

‘I’ll see you there if you want,’ she said.

I almost drove past it and said forget it, that what am I doing, and no one thinks straight in the middle of the night, but I made the right turn into the parking lot.

They knew her in there, gave her the big hello.

I said, ‘I’m guessing it’s out of range, that little erector set antenna you got behind the station. So they listen online.’

‘They do. Fernando even made a request once.’

‘What did he dedicate?’

‘A song called *La Camissa Negra*. I sent it out to his wife and kids in Quintana Roo.’

‘Well that’s one of those bittersweet ones I guess.’

‘Most of them are.’

She did order bacon and eggs and coffee, what do you know, so I did too.

She said, ‘I had a weird request come in tonight. Which you wouldn’t be aware of of course.’

‘Yeah I’ll have to pick me up one of those recliners. I resist, cause the idea makes me feel old. But man, took all the pressure off my leg.’

‘What’s with your leg?’

‘I’d like to say it’s an old football injury. The barebones answer is I sat at the computer too long one time.’

‘And what, like pinched a nerve?’

‘Yeah but don’t worry about it.’

‘I’m not *worrying* about it, I used to do physical therapy.’

‘Okay sorry. What was the weird request?’

‘I’ll get into it. Give me your big story first.’

‘All right. Well you know the Haight, right?’

‘Umm.’

‘Anyways we’re talking 1966. My uncle was doing the art for one of the counter-culture newspapers, *Good Times*. Also some of the rock posters. Not the big Bill Graham stuff but the smaller venues. He had a little apartment off the Panhandle, drawing table in there and such.’

‘Keep it moving please.’

‘So the police knock on his door, they say someone reported an assault in the building last night and did he know anything about it?’

‘Did he?’

‘He wasn’t home, he picked up a chick and spent the night at her place in Mill Valley. He later finds out, the

screaming that got reported was Janis Joplin auditioning for Big Brother and the Holding Company. They had an apartment in the building.'

Cheryl put down her fork and stared at me.

'Wow . . . that is an incredible story . . . I mean it.'

'At least for us music junkies. So worth waiting for? I didn't waste your time?'

'You didn't.'

'Okay now more interesting to me, the rodeo people. Y'ever follow up at all?'

'Oh yes. They made a trip out here after they were married a while. Not to West Marin but to the City. I went down and met them, we did some of the tourist stuff, had crab at *Scoma's*.'

'Yeah we assume those Wharf joints are tourist traps. They can surprise you, though next time take 'em *The Spinnaker* in Sausalito.'

'Well sadly there won't be a next time,' she said. 'Not too long after, there was a domestic issue. The whole thing is kaput.'

'God damn it. Are you serious? You're bursting my bubble here.'

'I know. When I heard it, it made me re-think what my show is all about. Is it just superficial lip service.'

‘No don’t re-think it.’

‘The Paul Simon song? Put them all together for one night?’

‘They’ll never match my sweet imagination, everything looks worse in black and white.’

‘See well you have to admit,’ she said.

‘First time I heard that one, I was passing through Pocatello, Idaho. There’s a story there too.’

‘You’re full of stories. Call in, I’ll set you up.’

‘Very funny. But I’ve been thinking, what *would* I ask for?’

‘And you came up with something?’

‘Only thing I could think, this guy I met backpacking through Europe in 1997 . . . Cut you off up front, this not a gay thing, okay? . . . But we hit it off great, he lived in New Jersey, and I found him on Facebook and tried to friend him twice but he ignored me.’

‘People have their reasons. Perhaps he felt his life direction didn’t match up to yours.’

‘He’s a lawyer, I’m a dumb drummer in a two-bit band. If you’re suggesting he’s embarrassed I doubt it . . . You have one?’

‘That got away you mean?’

‘Sure, whatever.’

‘I do, and it’s not for public consumption.’

‘So you’re the mediator. It’s all good.’

‘I suppose.’

‘What was the weird request tonight?’

‘A woman calls, she explains that her husband is twenty years older and suffered a stroke. And he essentially doesn’t know where he is.’

‘That’s rough.’

‘She had to place him in a facility, she says. His name is Willard. She says she doesn’t expect him to hear this, and he wouldn’t recognize her name if he did, but she wants to send out *Mr. Blue* for old times’ sake.’

‘Good one.’

‘The Garth Brooks version. Which I didn’t have. So I found the original.’

‘The Fleetwoods. Even better.’

‘Fine. Half hour later, a Willard calls. He sounds like a senior citizen. But he says he’s not in a facility, but that she left him for another guy after he came home from a fishing trip last fall.’

I mull this one over. ‘It could have been a fake guy of course.’

‘Sure. If he was, I don’t want to *think* he was.’

‘I hear you. This all on the air, or you’re screening it?’

‘On the air, why not.’

‘I like your style. Did Willard have a request?’

‘Yes. *My Old Friend*. Tim McGraw.’

‘I love that one. Heavy though . . . He was sending it out to *her*?’

‘Yes.’

‘We played it at a memorial service once. A guy fell out of a tree, trying to contain some storm damage on his property.’

‘That one I did have, but I didn’t play it.’

‘No?’

‘I substituted *Oh Happy Day*.’

‘Gee. The Edwin Hawkins Singers. Like 180 degrees different . . . You’re not going to tell me the ex-wife called back?’

‘She did, but this time I took her off-air.’

‘What’d she say?’

‘She scolded me, said how dare you.’

‘Tough crowd,’ I said.

‘They have their moments. Don’t ask me where I live, incidently, if that’s what you’re building up to.’

‘I wasn’t--then I sort of was--now I’m back to not.’

‘I do like to go to Spreckles Lake.’

‘You’re talking where they float the model vintage yachts around? That’s shit’s way too involved.’

‘I sit and watch.’

I said, ‘Wasn’t there a famous line, they also serve who only sit and watch?’

‘Stand and wait, but why split hairs,’ she said.