

## ON THE RADIO

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By Sarah Fonseca

*Nowhere to breathe easy  
No time to be young  
But I tell myself that I'm doing alright  
"Crazy on You", Heart*

I had gone to university with the intentions of becoming a writer, a journalist. It was only after I dropped out and abandoned any notion of ever going back to school that I actually began making something resembling a profit by writing. I did my best with the work I was being assigned, but even the most adept journalist couldn't have breathed life into those tragically generic topics. It felt fruitless, so I began seeking work elsewhere.

My mother taught and worked as a cleaning lady. My father told stories and worked never-ending construction jobs. Before anything else, I was raised to be happy. Happiness, however, had proved to be a very elusive thing. After railing against their template of work and play for so long, I was finally adopting it. The world soon began to feel much bigger than the handful of states I had journeyed through since dropping out. Any occupation that did not involve removing my clothes suddenly became an option.

Three semesters after withdrawing from Georgia Southern, I ran across John's classified advertisement for a personal assistant:

**Assistant for middle-aged handyman, at the request of wife.  
Hard work, good pay.**

A number followed the ad. I paused, contemplating. Things couldn't get much worse than they already were. Hell, maybe the gig would even give me something of substance to write about. I left John a message.

His prompt and enthusiastic response surprised me. We'd start work bright and early the next day at 6 AM, he said. I had been experiencing a series of humbling rejections for nearing two years then. It was a relief that someone, anyone, felt that I was good enough—even if it was a fifty-four year-old man who needed help rolling his trash cans out to the side of the road. Mt mom had some reservations with the arrangement, understandably so. When I explained to her that having the job would enable me to find a place of my own, move out sooner, and possibly return to school, she quickly warmed up to the idea.

*I looked out this morning and the sun was gone  
I turned on some music to start my day  
I lost myself in a familiar song  
I closed my eyes and I slipped away  
“More Than A Feeling”, Boston*

John was a man of a word. His Ford truck, lavender and lightly dusted with the grime of a hundred country roads, barreled into my gravel driveway that morning at an hour which I was normally asleep, let alone properly caffeinated and ready for manual labor. A classic rock tune blasted from the satellite radio boombox he had sitting atop his dashboard, its cord plugged into the cigarette lighter. In spite of his “I’ve been everywhere, man” façade, John, with his sun-weathered face and straw fedora, seemed surprised when I hopped in without a second thought, as if the motor oil-scented interior was a place I’d known all my life. I should have known better, but in the presence of men, I always seem to forget that I’m female. After all, I’d spend my childhood riding down dirt roads in the beds of trucks erring on the edge of antiquity; sometimes, while helping with chores. Others, just for the sheer fun of it.

*You’ve got your mother in a whirl  
She’s not sure if you’re a boy or a girl  
“Rebel Rebel”, David Bowie*

The truckbed toolbox rattled as we exchanged the condensed versions of our life stories. I went first. When I reached the humbling part where I’d been living at home for the last year or so, he interrupted me.

“So you’ve just been doing nothin’ and bumming around for a while, huh?” His blue collar drawl wasn’t admonishing, just matter-of-fact. I realized that it had been a long time since someone was that genuine with me.

“I guess so, sir,” I reluctantly admitted.

“Don’t call me sir, now. I ain’t your daddy.” We shared a laugh, the first of many. Through his shoebrush mustache, he told me about how his family had always lived in Georgia; his hometown of Thomson; his wife, the love of his life; his son who fought in Iraq; his grandchildren; his lung cancer—the reason his wife wanted him to have an assistant, a potential caregiver masquerading under the veil of apprenticeship. His tone didn’t change when he brought up his illness. The sky was blue. Birds had wings. John had cancer.

As we sped down that arching road surrounded by miles of gold courses, deteriorating barns, oak trees and abandoned country stores, I made it a point to not change my perception of John in light of this. I soon discovered that this wasn’t a difficult thing to do. In any case, I never wanted to be That Person: The one who shies away from making eye contact with a person in a wheelchair, or treats an ailing individual like a ceramic vase which resides precariously close to the edge of its pedestal.

That day, we began the project of cleaning up a fire-damaged mobile home, one of John's properties that he'd been renting to earn extra income in light of the economic meltdown. The trailer was in Indian Cove, a small, rugged subdivision located at the sphincter muscle of Lincoln County. Most of the houses there had three things in common: a Club Car golf cart in the front yard, a pontoon boat in the back, and some type of Winnebago or Airstream camper at this side. This was Sarasota, Florida for the hippies, the rebels without flags, and the misfits. They attend church, lest it actually amount to something...someday.

One of the first warm breezes of spring had picked up. The next door neighbor's forsythia bushes had recently exploded into bloom. Aggressive bumblebees hovered over them, daring any other living thing to come near their precious blossoms.

John dragged tools and his stereo from the pick-up truck. Jimi Hendrix played, and I was soon put to work gathering incinerated debris from within the single-wide's skeleton, its bony white exterior smeared black with soot. By the end of that task, I was also covered in it from the neckline of my t-shirt to the hard rubber toes of my Chuck Taylors. I could have easily auditioned for the role of the chimney sweep from Mary Poppins. John took one look at me and laughed. "You sure don't mind getting your hands dirty, do ya?"

Unless I was to count raising myself out of bed at 2 PM each afternoon, it had been awhile since I'd performed any type of manual labor. Though grueling, I couldn't help but feel a bit refreshed.

*To everything (turn, turn, turn)*

*There is a season (turn, turn, turn)*

*And a time for every purpose, under heaven*

"Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is A Season)", The Byrds

It seemed like the trailer would be salvageable after all, he said. When I asked him what caused the fire, John told me about the young woman who'd been renting his "lakeside getaway house" (there was no denying that it was a mass-manufactured home from the 1970s, but I'm sure it served its purpose nonetheless). When the water heater suddenly caught fire a few weeks prior, she was out of a place to live, and he was out one summertime hideaway on Clark's Hill Lake.

"When she came to me all apologetic-like, promising to pay me for damages, I stopped her and told her 'Hell no.' You know what else I said?"

"Nope. What else did you say?"

"I said, 'Honey, don't you ever love nothing that doesn't love you back.'" He let his hand fall heavily against the trailer's dusty white siding several times. It bent inward, absorbing the weight of his palm. The trailer was only a material thing. John understood that. I couldn't help but wonder if he believed the same thing about people; that we shouldn't invest in those who wouldn't invest in us. Something told me that he did.

It was in that moment that I wished that someone would have told me something of that nature two years beforehand, when I was on the cusp of making so many poor decisions in every aspect of my life. Then, I caught myself. If that had been the case, I wouldn't have ever met John.

I didn't have much time to mull over this. I was never sitting down for long. Whether I was raking or painting, there was always an entirely different task waiting for me when I finished. I enjoyed the pace. It kept me thinking, but not too much. It was something that had been my arch nemesis in those months. A neighbor's dog, Ted, some sort of pitbull mix with a caramel-chocolate coat, would trail after me as I worked, his severe underbite making him appear more blood-thirsty than he really was. Ted simply wanted affection. We all did.

Stooping over, John dropped a box of PVC pipes at my feet. Soon, I was assembling them into the shape of those that were melted in the fire. It was a mathematical and feminine puzzle of cylinders and curves, one that would take me more than one attempt to perfect. I remember wishing that I could go back to picking up scraps of trash, tiny fragments of what was once trim or carpeting or cabinetry, now all the same, black and moist with dew. No right-brain needed there. Blocking out the sounds of a premature spring wind and the fluid expelling from the broken water heater, I sat there, fiddling with the PVC bits. An hour and four mistakes later, I had finally duplicated the original piping. It didn't matter if I was in school or not. The math lessons would never stop.

*We don't need no education*  
*We don't need no thought control*  
*No dark sarcasm in the classroom*  
*Teachers, leave those kids alone*  
"Another Brick in the Wall", Pink Floyd

"Where's your daddy work?"

He's in jail."

"...oh. 'Nuff said."

"Do you go to church?"

"Not recently, no..." Still winded by his previous question and the smell of piping glue, I really didn't have the stomach to tell my boss that I didn't believe in much of anything—on the first day of work, no less. "Church is kind of a social spectator sport here," I said, replacing the cold truth with a lukewarm one.

"See, I love it! That's why I go. At my church, we have this adult group called 'The Been There, Done That Club.'"

In spite of the topic, John's excitement was infectious. The corners of my mouth burned from smiling.

"Oh, really. What kind of things have you done?"

"I've been married, I've had children, I've had more jobs than you can shake a stick at, I now have cancer..." Still working on installing the new water heater, John put his hand to his chin in thought.

"Well, let's see now...in my younger days, I had my share of women. I toyed with drugs, too." John was a fifty-something who listen to quintessential hippie music, so this was hardly a revelation.

It wasn't until the sun began making its descent behind the pine trees on the horizon that we started packing up. I drove John's truck as he indulged in his unofficial reward for the day's work: a 24-ounce beer that he stowed away in a cooler that morning.

We were homeward bound—but not before he cracked a final joke.

“Do you know why you're not supposed to drink and drive?”

“Why?”

“Because you might spill your drink.”

Even though the sun was sinking, things felt brighter than they had that morning, and the morning before, and the morning before that...

Back in the gravel drive outside the rickety house that had been my off-and-on home for twenty years, I got out. John slid over to the driver's side, but not before handing me fifty dollars—my pay for that day's work.

“I'll call you when I need ya, girl,” he said simply. Miles inside of me, fireworks erupted. I'd gotten the job. Even better, I'd finally gotten the chance to make a joke of my own.

“Don't call me 'girl'. You ain't my daddy,” I said with a punch-worthy smirk plastered across my face.

“And thank the Lord for that!”

*Take a sad song and make it better.*

“Hey Jude”, The Beatles

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