

The Niensens

Michael Larkin

I am Fujiko Nielsen.

Take a millisecond blink at me and what would you say? Look fast, now switch channels. Think hard. You'd think, *she's pretty*, right? Possibly *stunning*, even if Eurasian isn't your particular aesthetic. Maybe a little *aloof* if I wasn't smiling, or if I was, you might even say *cold*. Like my smile wasn't enough to obscure a deeper coldness within me. *Tortured*, you might say, if you caught me in the right we-bring-good-things-to-life light. *Shifty*, if you didn't. Probably *no sense of humor*. Cancel the show for lack of viewer interest, yes?

WRONG.

I will make you laugh until you cry, chump. I do voices. I can contort my body like a yoga swami. I've studied the best, the most comedic. People tell me I'm Gilda Radner reincarnated while they roll on the floor laughing at this funny Asian woman ("girl," they say). I tell you this: You blink your TV channel surfer at me and you know nothing but that you blinked. What you say about me says more about you if all you afford me is an appraising glance. Change the channel at your own risk, home boy.

I am Fujiko Nielsen, reporting live from Pittsburgh, Pee A with news you can use.

I can quote up to two dozen lines of dialogue from virtually every episode of every significant situation comedy of the past three decades and then some. Big whoop, you say. Mom always said don't play ball in the house, you say. Foooo-jeeee-ko, you got some 'splainin' to do, you say. The difference between me and you is that I can also tell you which shows did better than others in the overnights and the nationals, and I can tell you why. It's Nielsen business to know these things.

I am one one millionth of a ratings point. A little flash of electronic blue against the wall of an otherwise unlit upstairs room at night. Walk by on the sidewalk feeling lonely, then see that harsh spark of indigo spring from the dark window above and it'll make you think of a wide-eyed someone dying by electrocution or by having his gonads arc welded, and maybe it'll make you feel better by comparison. Or sorry you weren't arc welded yourself, like Jimmy Cagney: Top of the world, ma!

Ours was a Nielsen home for a time. I'm not going to tell you my real full name, but it is Fujiko something. Part Japanese, part Swedish, but I give you the Japanese part—excuse me, the Asian-American part—because that's what you'll pay attention to, that's what counts in your books. How did the latest mini-series play amongst Asians? Are Asians watching *Seinfeld* reruns? Yes sir, because I can guarantee you that if Japanese-Swedish Americans in the greater Western Pennsylvania area are cracking up at Kramer falling on his tail on Jerry's floor, or at the Chinese anti-Communist delivery guy bringing Elaine chow fun, then you can bet that all the Filipinos and Koreans and Hmong, etcetera, etcetera from Bangor to Barstow are busting a gut, too. We share culture, and so when we likee or no likee joke, it's because we're Asian.

Fucking morons.

The other day on a PBS cooking show, I saw a chunky white woman who, after creating ravioli and quesadillas, proceeded to deep-fry egg rolls for the viewing audience. She described to the PBS host how when she was a girl, her mother used to dress her and her sisters in kimonos while they made and devoured Chinese egg rolls, warm grease trickling between their slowly pudge-ifying fingers. *And now here I am, Barb, thirty years later, sixty pounds overweight.* I love it when people make pan-Asian integrations in a context where they don't know the differences. Nielsen doesn't do ratings for PBS, but I hear that cooking show tested well amongst idiots.

I'm not bitter. I love TV.

Back up, back up, back up. All this talk of context and Fujiko gives none. Hypocrite! you cry. Have you no control! Whatchoo talkin' bout, Willis? I am not, do not, waste not, want not. I will give you context before you start to cry because your too-short attention span cannot process adequately what's on a page instead of a screen. Story Television. You want your STV. I will tell you a story. Narrative: the quicker picker upper.

Context, condensed version. Sing it if you know it (and don't pretend you don't): This is a story 'bout a man named Sven. Grew up in Minnesota watching Milty, Sid, and Ed. Went out to the market to get himself some cheeese...when up from aisle seven came 'a bubbling tease. Japanese, that is. Black hair...Tokyo Tea...

Things started sweet, but got nasty sure and clear. The kinsfolk said, "Sven, move it outta here." So Sven took Midori and headed to the eeeast...landed in da 'Burgh where they're watching tee veeee. Black and white, that is. Geishas...pickled herring...mooovie stars...

...The Pittsburrrrgh Niensens! [cue banjos]

Father is middle America as defined by national news anchors. Father grew up in the steppes of Minnesota. Froze his little pale behind in those interminable winters, dusted off a few inches of snow, came inside, dropped boots in the mud room, and settled in for Uncle Milty and the *Ed Sullivan Show* with a hot toddy his mother would make him once he'd peeled the ear flaps loose from his face. I think of him sitting there, rapt by the black and white pulsing, a line of static eternally scrolling, dried skin flaking from his face, his nose running. It's not hard to picture. I take away wrinkles and whiskers and vodka nose and give him colorized cable access and it's the same look he's got on his face now when he's watching *NYPD Blue* or *Wall Street Week*. What's the bond market look like in the coming quarter, Detective Sipowicz? You gonna start talkin' on that, or you gonna lawyer up like a scumbag?

He's always liked to watch.

Mother grew up mostly without a TV. She was conceived in an Arkansas internment camp and was born free after WWII ended. TV, I think, looked to her parents like an electronic internment camp: everything confined within plastic and phony wood lines, secured with cold screws, covered with an unbreakable glass wall. You can watch people, but you can't touch them. Don't you want to watch? Budweiser's got that certain drinkability, Ed McMahon told her way back when Johnny Carson was gray, not colored. Mother laughs easily; she is naturally funny, so when she heard laugh tracks, she bristled and wanted to take my brother's aluminum bat and hit a home run into cathode tubes and copper wiring. Back off the TV, she once cried, Mother's coming. Only Father's love—of TV, of her—stopped her from swinging like Sadaharu Oh at an underhanded pitch.

At one time, Father had a friend among the Emmy people, and he presented his case for ratings power, asked what it would take to be a Nielsen family. With the demographic Father offered, Father's Emmy friend had the ratings people salivating:

What? Are you kidding? I mean, we've got a handle on San Francisco and New York and L.A. and Atlanta. We know what those people want within an eleven percent certainty plus minus. But a white and Oriental family...

Uh, that's JAPANESE-SWEDISH...

Excuuuuse me, JAPANESE-SWEDISH then, no offense, sheesh—a JAPANESE-SWEDISH family in Pittsburgh with a Russian youngster to boot? Damn straight we want to know what you little pierogi eaters are watching out there in your soot-stained brick houses. You like football and you like ketchup, but beyond that, we've been trying to figure out you middle America folks and your weird little conglomerated families for years.

Russian youngster?

I neglect to tell you of my brother, Mikhail Nielsen. I was a very hard birth, very hard—Mother reminds me when I've been ungrateful or disloyal in any way. After me, she said no way to more kids, natural-wise. She tells me sometimes that she can still feel the pain of childbirth, even now, almost thirty years later. But Sven and Midori still felt a hankering, so they went and got themselves Mikhail in an attempt to warm the Cold War. A singular act by children of the fifties and sixties, Father inspired by stories from the TV to bring a little Breshnev into the home. Father was so pleased by this addition that he soon wanted another. Mother said no and started talking about the pains of childbirth she was still feeling. Some years later, when *Different Strokes* was on TV, Father wanted to adopt an African-American baby from one of the local neighborhoods, Homewood or East Liberty, but Mother said no again, and Father didn't seem to mind so much.

We were a nuclear family. Mother, father, sister, brother. No pets, except a trio of feral cats that fed off bowls of Swedish meatballs and miso we left for them on our back porch. No need for more Niensens. Like the theme song for *Eight is Enough* used to go: There's a magic in the air we've found. Four is enough...to fill our lives with love.

It was about this time that Father got his Nielsen hankering.

I was twelve and Mikhail was six when the Nielsen man came to make us part of his family. I remember mostly his wide, ugly tie: white with blue circles inscribed by little yellow paisley paramercia. His tie was of the grotesque width and neon brightness you might see Tom Bradford wear. You know, Dick Van Patten's character, the father on *Eight is Enough*? Oh, now I'm dating myself. Strange expression that, isn't it? Dating myself. Like revealing in the same breath that you're both ancient and narcissistic. But I digress. Such lexicography is not for STV.

Tom Bradford's technician took the back off the TV, put in the little black box that would record our every move, fiddled around with tinkling wrenches and screwdrivers. The technician said nothing, but looked very annoyed to be there. Tom Bradford, who was quite young, did all the talking.

"So this is a black box like they have on planes?" Father asked, peering over the technician's shoulder.

"Almost yeah," Tom Bradford replied. "It wouldn't survive a plane crash. Ha ha. It's not indestructible. But it will record everything you watch on the TV just like a plane dealie would. What channels, when you change it, when it's on, when it's off."

"I don't like the sound of that," Mother said.

"It's nothing to worry about, ma'am. It's completely non-intrusive. You're doing a great service to ensure that the networks air only

the finest entertainment. Everything you watch is a vote. Watch a show, see something you don't like? Change the channel. You've just voted to cancel that show. Visa versa for shows you like. You have tremendous power." Tom Bradford had been trained well.

"Have you read *1984*?" Mother asked.

"Have I? Wha? Um."

"It's a novel."

"Honey, leave the poor man alone. This'll be fun," Father protested. He was torn between wanting to see how the technician was hooking things up and keeping Mother from performing the inquisition on Tom Bradford.

"Oh no, I see what you mean," Tom Bradford said. "I haven't read that particular year. A good vintage? Ha ha. I don't have time to read too much. I'm on the road quite a bit, checking up on our families." Tom Bradford fingered his wide disco sperm tie and leaned over to the technician. "How we doin' there, Bruce? Got an ETA on the install?"

Bruce the technician didn't reply at first. There was a long silence as Bruce the technician kept his face buried in the back of our TV. Father backed away from Bruce the technician after a few moments, finally realizing how in the way he was. Tom Bradford ticked his body back and forth like a metronome, grinned at Father and Mother as if to say the help you get these days. I sat in the La-Z-Boy like a lazy princess waiting for the show to commence once these tiresome drones had completed my bidding. The backs of my knees stuck to the upholstery in the humidity, and the only sounds in the room were Bruce the technician's tinkering and the backs of my legs sucking up sticky as they tore themselves from the chair and settled down again. Mother stood with her arms crossed, ignoring me and waiting for the ETA along with everyone else, until Mikhail clattered something hard and wet sounding onto the kitchen floor and drew her away.

Mikhail's spill noise brought Bruce the technician up. "They're rigged," he said and commenced putting the TV back together.

"What's that box called again?" Father wanted to know.

"An Audimeter," Bruce the technician said. The way he said it sounded like he was expressing disappointment in a Greek goddess: "Aww Demeter."

Father repeated the word in wonder: "Audimeter."

The Fonz is the first thing our Audimeter registered. Arthur Fonzarelli was about to comb his hair but looked at himself in the mirror, paused with the comb just above his hair, gave himself the "you're perfect, why bother?" look in the mirror and then said the fabled, "Ayyyyyy." Somewhere in New York or Chicago or Los Angeles or at a Stuebenville, Ohio insurance agency serving as a C.I.A.

front, it was being registered that the Niensens of Pittsburgh had an interest in seeing more of Henry Winkler. Father wasn't a fan of *Happy Days*, would normally have gone hunting for a movie of the week or a cop show like *Mannix* or *Rockford Files*, but now that we had the Audimeter, he was giving a chance to things he'd never tried before.

"You kids like this show?" he asked.

We nodded and watched for a few minutes. Potsie and Ralph Malph were helping Richie Cunningham figure out how to score during his date at Inspiration Point.

"Ooof dah, this is tripe," Father said, finally. "What do you kids think?"

"It's good. Keep it," I said.

"Potsie," Mikhail giggled.

"All right, until the commercial. We want to show these people that we won't stand for their commercials," Father said. He had taken over the La-Z-Boy, I lay on my stomach on the five-color shag carpet, and Mikhail sat sideways next to the TV, his right ear inches from its speaker. We looked like a commercial for something. The family watching TV watching the family watching TV.

"Big Brother is watching," Mother called from some strange place in the house.

"Change that dial, Mikhail," Father said as the commercial came on.

Mikhail reached up, palmed the dial, and methodically chunked it around from static to network to static to network again, careful to register each selection before moving on. Thirteen numbers on the dial and only six stations. Everything was colored a sort of blue-black, especially Mr. Spock's hair.

"Hey, *Star Trek* rerun!" Father shouted. Father had never announced what he was watching before in this manner.

"Yeaaaah!" I shouted, forgetting my loyalties to the *Happy Days* gang. Mikhail was enraptured by the screen, his hand sitting on the dial as though giving the TV a hands-on Heil Hitler, and the TV split his face in two, half of it maintaining its normal ruddy pink color, half of it the blue-black of the TV screen. I thought of him beaming up to the Enterprise, frozen at the halfway point of his molecules' dissolution.

Father began keeping sacred the TV listings that came with the Sunday paper. He also started buying and then subscribing to *TV Guide* to ensure there was always more than one source of information on what was coming, what information we could feed to the box. He wanted to control our viewing as much as possible, make conscious decisions about when to switch on and off, when to keep moving, and when to settle. He wanted the world to know that the Nielsen family

was full of discerning viewers who would neither be manipulated by mass appeal nor dismissive of programming without due consideration. We would give new shows a fighting chance. But if they stunk? Up your nose with a rubber hose.

Mother would refuse to watch with us, only turning on the TV herself on Sunday nights when it was time for *Masterpiece Theater*, shutting it right back off again when Alistair Cooke was done with his post-show narration. Sometimes, she'd walk right up to the TV, lean into the plastic grill jutting from its behind and speak at the Audimeter.

"That's what people want to watch! What do you think of that?"

"They don't track PBS, dear," Father said. "They only track for the networks."

"Will they know we weren't watching them?"

"I'd guess so."

"Then good," she said, her lips pressed close against the grill.

In the doldrums of summer, a sit-com pilot aired, the premise being that a space alien who looks like a skinny white calculus major comes down to Earth to work in a summer camp as a counselor. We had made a concerted effort to watch it and agreed it was terrible, but we never judged a sit-com on its pilot alone; characters needed time to develop, to get comfortable in their skin, especially if they were aliens. The network cancelled it after one show. We felt cheated.

Nielsen demographics on Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, family of four: docile, quiet Japanese-American homemaker, makes great tempura batter but eschews eye contact. Stern, humorless Swedish-American...ummm, steelworker Father. Yes, it's Pittsburgh, so that makes sense. Steel mills gradually closing, discontent abounds. Beautiful but scowling young daughter, likes dollies and dressing up like a geisha when she can get her hands on Mommy's face powder and satin robe. Adopted Russian son, small but sturdy, thighs like kielbasa, might have ended up in Siberian wrestling camp if Soviet sports authorities had gotten hold of him sooner. Sharp as a tack but looks like a dolt, square-headed, blue-black skin.

You fucking idiots.

We got into what athletes now refer to as a "zone," we three. Father would closely examine the *TV Guide* and I the Sunday paper TV insert for the best game plan for the coming week. Mikhail would execute our commands in our remote control-less home. Hours we would spend when Father came home from work and on weekends, Father and I critiquing, commanding Mikhail to change the channel, to spin the rabbit-ear antenna this way or that. Mikhail turning the color of ash, pistoning up and down, his hand fused to the dial or to the antenna's end, improving our reception. We looked

behind door number 3, sometimes 1, but never 2. We rated each episode of *Charlie's Angels*, guessed which Angel would use which shampoo that was advertised during the breaks (Kate Jackson: "Gee Your Hair Smells Terrific"). We squeezed the Charmin, I squeezed Mikhail, he'd change the channel. For a while, I could press on his toes and he would take us to a specific channel. Big toe, CBS. Middle toe, NBC. This little piggy ran all the way home, ABC.

I did all of this from an objective distance, even then. I laugh, sure. I remember lots. I'll rehash lines with you until the old rainbow bars pop up on screen to tell you *the night's over, I can't believe you're still watching*, but I know when I'm being manipulated. Hackneyed dialogue smells like someone poured a gallon of Charlie on you. I will not let a touching commercial make me cry. I love Hawkeye Pierce, J.J. and Thelma, Mary Richards, Rhoda, Sam and Diane, Tatum, Crockett and Tubbs, Wally and the Beaver, but I don't want to *be* them.

Mikhail was different. He became the TV. He knew what we wanted, sometimes before we did. It got so I'd be about to press his pinky toe and then *presto*, ABC came up before I'd executed the command. He stopped going outside and spoke little. We didn't notice this latter condition until he began to speak more frequently after we watched a replay of the movie *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming*, and Mikhail became Alan Arkin's tired Russian submarine officer for weeks and months thereafter.

"Whittaker, Walt. Always I am saying goodbye to you, and always I am seeing you again," Mikhail would say anytime one of us entered the family room where the TV was.

"What have you done to my son? My son is KGB!" Mother cried.

"E-mer-gen-see, E-mer-gen-see, evry bawdee to get from street," Mikhail said, reciting the lines that Alan Arkin had taught him in perfectly inflected Russian English.

TV dinners that weren't TV dinners became TV dinners.

"Sweeps starts next week, kids. We'll have to be very careful what we choose, lots of stuff to watch." Father munched away at his meal, feeding as if it were fuel rather than something to be savored. He shook anticipation ketchup onto his burger, bit in, then sloshed more unreal, oxygen-rich redness into the space his teeth had made while he chewed his previous bite. Father ate everything in those days like it was hold the pickle, hold the lettuce.

"I've got an experiment," Mother offered. "A TV experiment."

"Bly moant luke mmm boundo isssss," Father said with his mouth full, meaning "I don't like the sound of this."

"What if we unplugged the TV and didn't watch for the entire sweeps period? Total TV silence."

"Ufff da," Father said.

"No listen. We do this and see what ratings come up, see what the ratings look like without us. Maybe you'll get an idea of whether we really matter."

"Have it your way, have it your way," I said, singing a burger jingle. I have quite a good singing voice, then and now. Perfect pitch.

"Don't sing commercial jingles at the table, Fujiko," Father scolded, mouth and esophagus momentarily cleared.

"So what do you think?" Mother wanted to know.

"Uff da."

Mikhail was in his own world, turning in his swivel seat: quickly spinning away from the table and then slowly back as he came to rest his world-weary gaze on his plate. He said, "Burger ham. Always I am saying goodbye to you, and always I am seeing you again."

"We've got to find a new Russian influence for Mikhail," Father sighed.

"What we need is to get him to an eye doctor. Look at him," Mother said.

Mikhail's complexion was fully blue-black, the way it might have looked after a long Pittsburgh winter spent indoors, but it was only mid-autumn. Dark circles shrouded the underside of each eye, and his right eye was wider than his left, as though someone was holding it open with an invisible toothpick. He spun away from the table and then back, regarding his plate with the tired wonder of his teary, bulbous right eye.

"Fries French, always I am saying good..."

"Stop perseverating," Father said.

Sweeps came with its guest stars and nail biters and suicides and pumped-up hilarities and mini-series and mid-season cliffhangers, all set to *The Sound of Music*. We watched every night after dinner, two hours, three hours, past our bedtime, well into mature prime time. Mother protested, but Father said it was a special time, a TV extravaganza that we should experience together. We were Niensens, Father said, and we owed the sweeps our full attention.

"You're so serious, Sven."

"Well yes, of course I am."

"About the stupidest things." Mother let sweeps ride without further protest until it was over, reading silently in a different world at the other end of the house. Father loved TV too much to be bothered, and so did we. I had indentations like stretch marks along my bare arms as the shag pressed into my skin. Mikhail sat at his post close by the TV, sometimes putting his ear against the speaker, always gazing up at the screen glowing just a few inches from his nose. His right eye glistened and grew wider.

Tom Bradford called a few days after sweeps had ended. "Tom!" Father exclaimed. Father was the sort of man who greeted a telephone salesperson with utter brevity and curtness, but Tom Bradford was different. Tom was a Nielsen man, part of the family. Tom called Father "Sven."

"Oh, I see," Father said into the receiver. "Yes...No...That can't be right. I turn it off myself every night...Did you see where we watched *The Sound of Music* cover to cover? Even the commercials...Yes...No...I didn't...Can you come and check the Aww Demeter?...How do you know?...I see. I see. All right then. We'll be extra careful...We'll see you. Over and out, Tom."

Father's face was clenched and confused, like Mr. Roper's on *Three's Company*, the show that taught me about sexual innuendo and homophobia by rote.

"That was Tom Bradford," he said.

"Na uh," I disagreed. "No way was that Tom Bradford. Why would Tom Bradford call you?"

"Not *that* Tom Bradford."

"Oh."

"What's the matter?" Mother asked, having slipped into the room to see who'd called.

"He says that our TV is tuned to the same UHF channel's test pattern from midnight until about five in the morning, every night. They think we're idiots, forgetting to turn off our TV. Or else we're actually watching the test pattern for hours on end. Either way, we're idiots. I don't see how it's possible. I turn the TV off every night. Or Mikhail does."

"You see? You see?" Mother said. "The Audimeter is not only watching you, it's giving the wrong information about us. What use is all this?"

"Tom said the Aww Demeter is registering just fine. He said they knew we watched *The Sound of Music*, so the Aww Demeter is fine."

"I say no, I say that it's malfunctioning. Who knows what harmful rays it's putting out?"

"It's not about harm, Midori, it's about accuracy."

"Would it be accurate to say that you're acting like an ass?"

"No, but maybe the Aww Demeter will have a reading on that." Father was not given to sarcasm, but he was becoming quite good at it. I credited TV dialogue.

"Stop sounding like you're apologizing to a Greek goddess."

"What?"

"It's Audimeter." Mother pronounced it "Odd Imiter."

"Ufff da."

In school, no one knew we were a Nielsen family. Father had sworn Mikhail and me to secrecy, saying that letting on we were Niensens could compromise the integrity of the data the Audimeter was collecting. Father put it in heroic terms: The Niensens were counting on us, and letting others in on the secret would be tantamount to treason, would likely cause us to be persecuted. Did we understand the gravity of the mission? We agreed to his terms, as dutiful and loyal to him as Mr. Sulu and Mr. Chekhov were to Captain Kirk. So in school I was just Fujiko, smart student who some of the kids called "Fudgesicle."

After sweeps, my schoolwork started to slip. I had trouble paying attention in class, and my workbooks and tests came back from the teacher marked in ketchup red ink. I had always been a good student, and this academic decline had my teacher, Miss Renworth, a little worried, even moreso when I told her that I was upset because my brother Mikhail had a nasty, life-threatening eye disease he'd picked up in Russia and that it looked as though there was little that could be done about it. I promised to try harder and then surprised myself by bursting into tears. I let Miss Renworth hug me for a while, until I remembered all the strong women—Barbara Stanwyck as hardy Mrs. Barkley on *The Big Valley*, Esther Rolle as the strong-willed, widowed mother of three on *Good Times*—and said, "I must be strong. I must not cry. You mustn't call my parents. They have so much to worry about."

"Oh I won't, Fujiko sweetie. I won't, you brave girl," Miss Renworth said and cradled me in the empty classroom as I ceremoniously dried my tears.

I thought: Welcome to Fantasy Island.

There were other changes after sweeps. I began staying up later and later as my sleep cycle shifted. We still watched TV, though not as much as during sweeps, and everyone spoke far less, Mikhail almost not at all. We all seemed to sleepwalk through the house, and the progress of each evening was marked by non-vocal noises more than anything else. Auto crashes and xylophones for afternoon cartoons. The front door squeaking closed against the deadbolt and doorjamb as Father returned from work. The hiss and bang of running water and pan clatter as Mother prepared dinner while fake typewriters sounded out the news from Walter Cronkite. Then taps of forks and knives against china, like four bad drummers each keeping separate, off-beat times. The kissing shuffle of Mother's slippers down the hallway to my parents' bedroom, excusing herself for the night. Then the two farts: the gaseous squall the La-Z-Boy kicked out as Father sat down after dinner and the little euphonious "boop" the TV would gasp as Father shut it down for the night.

There were also the vert hold lines. They began appearing shortly after sweeps, first one scrolling through at a time, then two, until after several weeks, the screen was split into four distinct horizontal sections every time the TV was turned on. The lines remained fixed until Father would command Mikhail to correct them, at which point Mikhail would jimmy the vert hold button, spin the antenna, chunk the dial a few times, and get the lines moving again, which was more aggravating than the fixed lines. Father had had enough and called Tom Bradford for help when a Bob Hope Christmas special was turned into a Picasso by the static and broken lines.

"It's the Aww Demeter, Tom. I'm quite sure of it. It's wreaking havoc with our picture. And it's getting worse...What?...I know it is, and I wouldn't bother you during the holidays if it weren't important, but short of sweeps and the first month of the season, the holidays are a pretty key time, wouldn't you say? If we can't watch because of the Aww Demeter, then that will throw the whole ratings system off, won't it?...Oh and gee, where are my manners? Merry Christmas, Tom. I apologize for calling, but I think you need to know right away when you've got faulty equipment, don't you think? I mean, you understand that my TV is completely fritzing here...Huh?...But if it's not that...What?...I'm telling you, every night it's off when we go to bed. It can't be...Well, why did you wait so long to tell me? You have to know that that information isn't right."

Father recradled the phone. "I can't fucking believe it. They've been registering that goddammed test pattern on our TV every night since sweeps ended. It's been going for a solid month now."

None of us were very interested in this revelation—what did I care what registered after dark, when I slept in broken fashion, overtired and under-dreamed?—though I was intrigued by Father's use of the word "fucking." So was Mother.

"Don't fucking say fucking, Sven," she said, leaning against a doorway arch.

"E-mer-gen-cee, E-mer-gen-see, evry bawdee to get the fuck from fucking street," Mikhail said. He was starting to look like Lon Chaney as the black and white Phantom of the Opera, only his eyes were grayer with the faintest opaque hint of cataracts.

"Uff da. What is wrong with you people?" Father said.

"Fuck if we know," I said, for which I was sent to bed without TV. My impeccable, TV-honed comic timing was slipping.

Though my room was warm and I didn't feel sick, I shivered underneath the blankets, unaccustomed to hearing the silence of my body at that hour of the day. My eyes felt encased in thick sockets, and my face was numb, the consistency of putty. The titles on the bindings of the books on my shelf hurt to look at, as did the phony signatures on the posters of *The Six Million Dollar Man*, Ponch Poncherello from *CHiPs*,

and *Speed Racer*. I closed my eyes and shivered through a headache and the depths of silence in my room.

I dreamed of a snake hissing because it was getting soaked at the base of a roaring waterfall along with a small tribe of cicadas that was registering its protest even louder than the waterfall's roar. Then the snake was sucked into the bottom of the waterfall through a vacuum tube and out into the middle of a desert of sand dunes where it seemed to be happy, and yet a strange unease settled as the sand blew over the snake's scales, registering a small, gritty scrape that was barely audible, until I realized that the sand the snake was crossing was me. I woke up to hear the scrape and had the distinct sensation of the snake being on top of me, which sat me up in my bed in the dark, my heart pounding. The scraping hiss was there, but faint, then distinct as if coming closer, then gone again.

I opened my door and looked out. The hissing was gone and replaced by a new sound, a kind of high-pitched whine I imagined might have driven a dog mad. I followed the sound down the hallway and into the living room, where I found the TV on, a rainbow test pattern filling the dark room with an eerie prism of electronic color. The room was empty, but I felt as though I had descended into some sort of basement in my house populated with gangsters and boogie men in the form of department store furniture. The rainbow of the TV threaded into the multicolored nubs of the rug and made the floor seem alive. I raced across the rug as if over hot coals and leapt into the La-Z-Boy, curling up there for protection from the moving immobiles on the rug.

Slowly, my shaking stilled, effluvia in the room stopped moving, and I began focusing on the bars of color on the screen. There were no vert hold troubles. The bars ran vertically across the screen without interruption, undivided movements of red and green and blue underscored by a horizontal bar of black into which they all seeped along the bottom. I squinted to merge colors. I turned my head sideways, then righted it and simply stared straight on like Mr. Spock into Pandora's box. I listened to the high scream. Felt my eyes receding deeper and deeper into the thickening, numb skin of my face, the scream fainter and fainter, but never fully silencing. I slept.

Dreamed of nothing.

A suggested skit for *Saturday Night Live*, later in the program, maybe after the second musical number: A Japanese-Swedish daughter sleeping on La-Z-Boy positioned in front of test pattern on TV is awakened abruptly when her shuffling Japanese-American mother presses a button, causing the speaker to say "boop" (a very funny noise by its own self). Mother sees daughter spike bolt upright in chair and screams in surprise. Daughter, surprised at her mother's screaming, screams as she has been taught to right back at her mother, until the

screams become comic in their lengthy duration, little girl squeal and womanly squeal seeking in some measure to outdo each other, to stake a higher claim on the right to be frightened, put out, scared out of their nightgowns. Then John Belushi comes in, dressed in character as samurai, says something nonsensical like "Oburry masKAT!!" with eyes bulging and then pauses, panting silently at the now-quieted mother and daughter while the live audience whoops and hollers in appreciative recognition of Belushi's recurring character. Then after comical, speedy hand gestures back and forth between mother and daughter in which nothing intelligible to the audience is said, Belushi gives another nonsensical "be quiet!" shout in faked Japanese and then spins and slices his sword through the TV screen, raging at it, tearing it to shreds of its TV prop balsa wood components, the live audience clapping and screaming happily all the way into the commercial.

"You'll be my good girl," Mother said. I agreed, though I already was good.

"Every mother and daughter need to share secrets," Mother said and winked.

I said, "I agree," and then thought of shampoo.

A fuse blew inside the TV after New Year's, causing everyone on-screen to grow envious and seasick. The screen's color ran in gradations of lime green at the center out to a faint teal green at the edges. Every character near the center of the frame appeared to have spent a lot of time tanning on Vulcan. Those on the periphery looked ill, ready to barf.

"Oh, this just takes it," Father said, discovering the green for the first time.

Mother shushed him, wanting to hear a stream of innuendoes Paul Lynde was spinning on *Hollywood Squares*. Mother had taken to watching with us beginning January 1, like TV was a New Year's resolution, or like the night time test pattern bandit's secret was out of the bag, point made, Big Brother served notice, daughter frightened, so succumb, succumb, succumb.

"Goddammit," Father said at the green screen.

"Shhhh," Mother said again.

"Ufff da."

"Shhhhh, I said 'shhhhhhh'."

"But everything's green."

"Shut up, Daddy," Mikhail said, his voice guttural and Russian. Nobody seemed to notice what he'd said, perhaps because Father was picking up the phone to dial Tom Bradford.

"My TV is absolutely on the fritz, and I'm sure it's because of that machine, that monster inside of it," Father yelled at Tom Bradford through the receiver. I couldn't hear any voice coming back, which

made me think of Tom as a patient and coldly calm man, one who had aged by years over the mere months it had been since we'd seen him. He really was Tom Bradford, and Father was one of his many problem children. "Do you understand that my TV is dying?... Oh, all right. I'll be right here. I'm not going anywhere."

Father hung up, said no one was to use the phone because Tom Bradford was calling back. Father had disturbed him at a bad time.

"Bad time?" Father said. "When is it a good time for ol' Tom? I think Tom is starting to slip, starting to neglect his duties." Mikhail was changing the channel and came across John Wayne. "Ooooo, John Wayne!" Father said. The tube was airing a greened commercial for John Wayne Week. Movies of John Wayne out West in black and white, then into World War II from air and land, a foray into Vietnam, and finally finishing with *True Grit*, a vision of the Duke returned to the West, this time in color, though for us only in green.

"Duke," Mikhail giggled. "Dookie. Duke Duke Duke Duke Duke."

"Oh, I don't like him. I don't like him at all," Mother said, not moving from her seat. John Wayne, as Rooster Cogburn, was grinning at her, or more accurately, at something over her shoulder in the imaginative distance that we and his gaze shared.

"Don't like him?" Father cried from his post alongside the phone, leaning against the phony wood paneling on the wall onto which the phone was grafted. He had his hand over the receiver, stroking it. "How can you not like the Duke?"

"Dookie," Mikhail said. His face was lit in green, like a small museum lamp was positioned somewhere under his bangs to give all viewers a vision of the movie monster his face had become. His hand held onto one of the rabbit's ears, slowing the vert hold problem and rendering John Wayne more visible.

"Have you even given him a look-see? A real look?" Father asked Mother.

"All right, all right, mind your blood pressure. I'll give him a try," Mother said

"Take 'em to Missouri!" John Wayne hollered from horseback in a black and white clip in which Walter Brennan looked on approvingly.

"And kill 'em all along the way," Mother said, a slight grin on her face.

"Dookie kill. Duke Duke Duke," Mikhail said.

The phone barely had time to form the physical movements required to ring before Father yanked the receiver from its perch.

"What's the word, Tom? Oh...uh huh...uh huh...I don't understand...OK...well listen, I'm sure it's nothing. She's never had problems before...listen, I'm expecting an important call so I'm afraid I'm going to have to end things here...thanks much, mmmmmmmmm, bye." Father pressed the plunger abruptly to end the call, then released

it and said, "Tom? Tom?" and apparently hearing nothing but dial tone, replaced the receiver. "Damn."

Father watched John Wayne clips until the commercials started running. First up was a rehash of the holiday commercial in which thousands of diverse people express their desire to buy the world a Coke. Christmas was over, but there was still time for some carbonated capitalist good cheer.

"Fujiko," Father said. "Have you been having trouble in school? That was your teacher."

"No worries. Everything is cool," I said, feeling completely unconcerned about Miss Renworth's calling, though she had violated her promise not to do so.

"Long as you're sure."

"No worries."

Father took to stroking the receiver again, yanked it up, said, "Hello? Hello?" and then recradled it.

"This commercial is quite sweet, really," Mother said, looking misty-eyed at the TV world singing in perfect harmony, everyone sugar buzzed on corn syrup, caffeine, and opium. "Don't change the channel, Mikhail, I want them to know we like this one."

Father tried to raise Tom Bradford several times that week to no avail. We took part in John Wayne week, watching every minute of John Wayne's settling of the west, his shooting down of Jap Zeros, his shooting from both hips while atop a horse at full gallop. In *The Green Berets*, we even saw him work with Mr. Sulu to try to convince the Vietcong to fight like it was World War II all over again. We all watched. Mother bought real TV dinners, took over the La-Z-Boy, showed us how to eat our meals in foil like astronauts. Father stood vigil against the wall, answered every phone call, always disappointed. Mikhail worked fiercely to keep the picture intact, delined, and destaticized, never saying a word, slouching his way around the TV, his skin aglow with a kind of received luminescence like the hash marks on an electric clock that stay lit at night.

Then Tom Bradford called. We all knew it was Tom Bradford, had a vested interest in what he had to say about fixing our damned TV. Father only said a few words, mostly listened, receiving in shocked silence whatever Tom Bradford had to say. When he hung up, he looked like he might cry. The dial tone bounced off Father's ear and circled around the kitchen a few times.

"You know what that bastard said? He said we were too 'unusual' of a family. He said he wanted a more 'usual' family. What the hell does that mean?" Father said.

"What are you saying?" Mother said.

"He called me 'Sir.' Never once called me Sven."

"And what about the TV?"

"They have regular turnover. Statistical procedures had to be followed. Said we'd been 'adequately compensated.' That's horse feathers. We've received enough money to go out to maybe one meal as a family."

"Sven."

"The Nielsens don't want us. They're coming tomorrow to take out the Aww Demeter."

Mikhail looked up from the TV. His face was something horrible to behold; my brother had become Quasimodo. He started turning the dial absently with meaty thunks.

"Cut it out, Mikhail," I said. Mikhail kept right on thunk thunk thinking.

"The Nielsens don't want us," Father repeated. "Who in this Godforsaken country is better than we are?" His voice dropped to a near whisper amidst the din coming from the TV set. Mikhail seemed to have turned up the sound. "Who's been more loyal than we have?"

"Oh, Sven," Mother said exactly as someone on *General Hospital* might have, though she remained seated in the La-Z-Boy, her neck craning backwards to look at Father.

The static on an in-between channel hissed, then Gene Rayburn on *Match Game* said "...because he fell on his blank," then static hiss. I scooted over towards Mikhail and at first gently moved to lift his hand off the dial, only to find that his fingers were snaked over it as if grafted. I tugged harder, telling him to stop, but he was a strong six-year-old, gripping the dial, not changing channels anymore but holding fast to the static he'd found on Channel 13 of the UHF dial. Soon I was pulling at his wrist, working at tugging tendons loose, feeling my anger rise, wanting to impale his little hand on the antenna the way one of the *Green Berets* had spiked a North Vietnamese on the branch of a dead Hollywood soundstage tree. Mikhail turned and looked at me, his good eye squinting, his right eye wide and filmy.

"Get away from me you Jap bastard!" he said.

I let go of his hand and fell back, astonished, breathless, as if pushed from a plane without a parachute. I didn't look at my parents, but I could hear them breathing.

"Apologize to your sister!" Mother said.

"Nyet," Mikhail said, still looking at me.

"Right now!"

"Nyet. Nope. No way, pardner."

"Sven!"

Father breathed. "They're coming tomorrow to get the Aww Demeter."

Father took the day off from work at the steel mill (that's not really what he did for a living, but STV doesn't care to show the reality) so he could be present when the technician came to call. I slept in that school day, nobody coming in to tell me to do differently, and I wasn't surprised when I heard the doorbell ring at about ten o'clock and walked out into the front hallway to find that Mikhail was there in his pajamas too, also having slept in or played sick or whatever it was we thought we were doing.

We four stood in the hall, and Father opened the door on Bruce the technician who'd installed the Audimeter some seven months prior. He possessed the same stoicism I remembered from his first visit, but he had to work hard to keep from looking startled to see all four of us hovering like ghosts in his path. He worked the insides of his mouth under a handlebar mustache.

"Come to take the black bawx, an'at," Bruce the technician said, clipping the bill of his Pirates cap in a salute.

Father, holding the door open, stood to one side and said nothing as he let Bruce pass through. Bruce nodded awkwardly towards Mother, took Mikhail and me in with a few furtive glances, and then made for the TV in the family room beyond. He worked quickly, dropping his tools a few times as we stood watching him just as we had done when he installed it, only now there was no Tom Bradford to break the silence, and Father wasn't interested in peering over Bruce's shoulder. It wasn't long before Bruce had the Audimeter extracted and resting atop the TV like some alien being. It looked as though it hadn't collected any dust, let alone data. It just sat atop the halved TV, rectangular and black, daring anyone to assign it significance.

"May I?" Mother asked, her hand resting on the box as Bruce wrestled to quickly replace the back of the TV.

"Be my guest," Bruce said, and as Mother picked up the box, added, "Heavier than yinz think, id'nit?"

"Wouldn't you say that this belongs to us?" Mother asked him, holding the box in front of her with both hands. Father stood to one side looking sick to his stomach like the teal characters at the fringes of our TV.

"Well, nawt really," Bruce said, glancing up from his work.

"But it was in our TV. We owned it and used it for all these months," Mother suggested.

"I'm nawt gonna get all legal an'at. I've got no argument with yinz folk."

Mother turned towards Mikhail and nodded, sending Mikhail scurrying out of the family room. Mother looked at Father and began walking in the direction that Mikhail had disappeared, back towards the front door. Father followed, and then so did I. Bruce took no note of our departure.

In the front hallway, Mikhail was waiting with his junior aluminum baseball bat, 26 inches long, 22 ounces heavy. He wheeled it once expertly. "Baseball been berry berry good to me," he said. Mother, Father, and Mikhail walked single file out the door and into the cold morning, and the spikes of wind trailing in their wake shot up my nightgown and drew goose bumps. I shivered after them and watched as my Mother, as if in some kind of prearranged gesture, extended her arms out before her, dropped the Audimeter into the light dust of snow that had layered our abbreviated front lawn, and then gestured to Mikhail to hand her the bat. Mikhail did so, and Mother gripped it at its center and then handed it to my Father as one might pass over an honored sword. Father took it solemnly and then, without pausing, as if he was afraid to lose his resolve, he hurtled it through the air with the awkward coordination of someone who hadn't swung a bat since boyhood, and brought it down hard onto the Audimeter. Just once, but a satisfying crack ripped the air. He gave the bat to Mother, who stepped back a pace to get the proper spacing and then took to coming down on the box as if chopping wood or killing a near-dead animal. She hacked at it six, seven, eight times, wanting it to be buried underground through the force of her blows, before giving Mikhail back his bat. I watched Mikhail whack at the box's sides, sending it heavily lumping around the lawn a few inches at a time, the box wheezing each time with new breakages, hidden bolts moaning inside the hard casing. The sound of the metal's squeaks and quivers made me feel ill.

"Want a few whacks, darling?" Father said to me, smiling sadly, then dropped the smile as he looked past me towards the door, where Bruce had emerged, his job now finished only to find a small six-year old with a rugby player's build thrashing his charge and its carefully collected data around the snow-patterned lawn. Bruce's stoicism had returned. He watched Mikhail playing with the square, decrepit, metal polo ball, whacking it with his junior model mallet and shook his head once.

"I've seen it all now," Bruce said. "Yinzers is fucked up." He left us without further ado, climbing slowly into his rig and driving away.

As the technician drove away, Mother began singing.

"I'd like to teach the world to sing...in perfect har-mo-ny." She "Doo doo dooed" some more of the lyrics that she couldn't remember.

At the appropriate pause in the song, Father sang a "Coca Cola!" then after Mother had "Doo doo dooed" for a while, he did it once more.

Father put his arm about Mother's shoulders, she put hers around the small of his back, and they turned to go inside. Father reached down and gave her bottom a squeeze, and Mother giggled, "Please don't squeeze the Charmin," as they passed indoors.

Mikhail had given up on decapitating the Audimeter after first Bruce and then my parents stopped watching him. He too watched our Father groping our Mother's ass, and then turned to me, his right eye still wide open against the cold. He ran at me and wrapped me in a bear hug, the first time he had ever done such a thing.

"I love you like no man has ever loved a woman," he said, in an unfamiliar, melodramatic voice. He squeezed me tighter, his monster face buried in my chest. "Oh darling, never let us part. What shall we ever do? What shall we ever do? Boo hoo. Boo hoo."

He let me go, and ran towards the front door of our house, giggling. Then he stopped abruptly, turned to face me, said, "You dirty rat!" and then made the sound of a machine gun as he shivered his body backwards, riddled with imaginary bullets. He wove expertly, as a stunt man would have, then fell to his knees before slumping forward, face down in the snow. He lay there for a few beats, leaving me bewildered and staring down at him, then he stood up, robot-like, and went inside the house with snowflakes clinging to his pajamas.

I turned away from my family and looked at our narrow street, wondering who might have seen this episode. The street was empty of people, lined on both sides with dottings of parked cars, most residents at school or at work or inside where they belonged on a cold January morning. Across the street, I noticed for the first time where our neighbors, the Schwartzes, had steamcleaned the front of their stone house, layers of mill soot having been stripped away to reveal the underlying gray slate. Trees up and down the street were naked, one indistinguishable from the next, forming a kind of soft palate the further away they were from my view. Between their empty limbs, the sky was blue-black. A small muddy mass lay crushed in the street: A bird? A pile of rock salt? A faint stink rose in the air, and it took me a moment to remember what ripe ginkgo smelled like. Mikhail's thrashing about the lawn had brushed aside swaths of snow, both revealing and cracking open fallen stink fruit that the trees had surrendered before Thanksgiving, but which had lain forgotten in their floral matting. The yellow berries and the corresponding yellow fan leaves of the ginkgo tree lay exposed in the gaps of snow, now so much hibernated mulch for the lawn, a stink of remembrance.

"Fujiko," Mother called dreamily as though things like this happened everyday, "Come inside before you catch cold. Soup's on!"

The smell of the ginkgo gagged me. I saw my street and our mailbox and our driveway and the cracks in the sidewalk and the rusted tricycle in front of the Schwartz's sandblasted home and none of it looked familiar to me anymore.