

This is About the Radio

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This barbershop was bad news, Sam could tell from the sidewalk. There were combs suspended in glass jars of blue juice. A poster in the window showed a man with lightning bolts buzzed into the hair at his temples. And the price! Sam tugged at his hair with thumb and forefinger. It reached his shoulders. He watched red and blue stripes chase each other's tails around the barber's pole until he felt the sidewalk lurch beneath his feet. The barber knocked on the inside of the glass.

"You coming in?" He was bald.

"No," Sam said, "I don't think so. Not for twenty dollars."

The barber threw his hands up in the air.

"Cheapskates!" He made an all-encompassing gesture with his comb. "Everyone in New York now. They are all cheapskates."

Sam shuffled home to his empty, South Williamsburg apartment. There was no mail, but someone had shoved three take-out menus under the door. It was his girlfriend, Sarah, who insisted he cut his hair. She'd run her fingers through it and invoked images of tumbleweeds, shaggy dogs, and mops. He told her she was mixing metaphors, but she remained firm.

Sarah was in Connecticut, preparing for her sister's wedding. It sounded like a beastly affair. Sam was to be seated with a half-dozen elderly aunts and uncles. Sam was to look respectable. Sam was to get a hair cut.

He lay down on their sagging bed. He smelled Sarah's pillow and it smelled like Sarah. He smelled his pillow. It smelled like cigarettes. He had not yet met Sarah's parents.

He wouldn't have such a problem going if it weren't for the radio stations, he'd explained to Sarah. She had a wide, pretty face that broadcast her thoughts and when he mentioned the radio her thoughts said: I do not believe this is about

the radio. It was like he could read them scrolling across her forehead.

But it was about the radio! Sam planted his face in Sarah's pillow and said it out loud. He'd driven to Connecticut every day for a year, commuting, and knew there came a point on the highway where WFMU's rock started to fade. At first it was just a static crackle as he passed below power lines but, as the roadside foliage grew thicker, Connecticut leached WFMU of life and left him with WKCT, Connecticut's number one easy-listening station. It wasn't only that the music philosophically troubled Sam, he could always turn it off. It was that every quarter mile there was a billboard: WKCT's *Love Songs for Lonely Hearts* was hosted by Patt-with-two-t's, the state's official late-night empathizer. On the billboards, Patt always had a phone to his ear and an exaggerated expression of sympathy on his face. They showed the dial-in number and the catch-phrase, "Tell Me All About It." Sam hated Patt. He hated him more once Sarah confessed she and friends used to call him at slumber parties and tell him their pubescent girl type problems. What sort of problems? Sarah wouldn't say. Sam couldn't stand to think about the things Patt-with-two-t's knew about Sarah that he did not. So it was really Patt that was keeping him from Connecticut. Patt, and a haircut.

Sam found a pair of kitchen scissors. He brought them to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, steeled himself. The scissors' legs were gummed together (had he cut something unconventional with them? A peach or a boiled egg?) and Sam had to use both hands to pry them apart. He held a hank of hair away from his ear and cut. He did the same thing on the other side.

The overall effect was not good. The lopsidedness of the cuts gave the impression that Sam was leaning to the left. He shifted his weight onto his right foot, balanced there. He appeared upright.

"Fuck." Sam said.

He would have to go to the barber. Or else, there was Marjorie.

Marjorie worked at a salon. She also cut hair in her apartment, which had been their apartment for two years until he left in the middle of the night last spring.

There was a rule, Sam was sure, about asking ex-girlfriends for favors, but he couldn't go to the wedding as he was. He imagined himself showing up in Connecticut in his current state. Sarah wouldn't yell, but she would look genuinely confused by his failure to do what was promised. This was the worst part. Sam was skilled at living up to the expectation that he would charmingly fail to come through. He would shrug and smile and people would say, Of course, you didn't. I knew you wouldn't. These were things he was used to and he felt comfortable with them. But Sarah, no matter how many times he messed up, was surprised every time.

He'd seen Marjorie several times since he'd left. They *got coffee*, a euphemism for rehashing on neutral territory. They had overly casual conversations where she underplayed what had happened. Of course you did, she said. They could still be

friends. She was fiercely determined that they could still be friends.

He dialed Marjorie.

"Hello?" She answered.

"Hey, Marjorie, it's Sam," he said. He tried to remember their last conversation. His resolve weakened, how should he ask her?

"Sam? Were your ears burning? You won't believe who I'm standing with. Guess who I'm standing here with." Sam could not imagine who she was standing with.

"Who?"

"Joan and Dennis!" she said. "We were just talking about that trip to Coney Island, when you puked on my shoes? We were just laughing and laughing and then my phone rang and..."

"That is funny," Sam said. Though it wasn't, really. Because rollercoasters had always made him sick and because he hated Joan and Dennis. He'd hated them when he was dating Marjorie and had enjoyed the luxury of not thinking about them since he left. Joan and Dennis worked at the salon. They were the sort of people who asked intimate questions and then proceeded to speculate on the answers themselves. More often than not they were so pleased with their own conclusions that in the end they forgot to ask for the real answer.

"Listen, Sam, we're about to go into the subway, but why don't you come over for dinner? Dennis just bought pork chops and Joan is going to cook them. You should come over."

She sounded so happy with the friendly overture of his calling that he couldn't now confess it had all been because he needed something.

"Sure," he said. "I'll be there. I'd love to."

"Great. See you around eight."

Sam hung up the phone. He moaned, fully feeling the roiling awkwardness and expectation in his gut. He maybe could have conjured enough magnanimity to stomach Joan and Dennis, but pork chops! Sam hated pork chops. He thought they looked closer to corpses than any other kind of meat. Sam needed remove from the things he ate. Maybe he should cancel.

But there was still the matter of the haircut. He would have to go and, somehow, ask Marjorie at dinner to cut his hair. Was there a graceful way to bring it up? Could he grease the evening such that the topic would slide effortlessly into the conversation?

Or, Sam thought as he stumbled to the bathroom mirror, perhaps he wouldn't even need to ask. Mops and tumbleweeds! He mussed his hair with his fingers. It was possible, just possible, that if his hair looked terrible enough Marjorie would volunteer herself to cut it, as if it were her own idea all along.

"I am a genius," Sam said to himself as he took scoops of Sarah's putty colored hair cream. He arranged his already lopsided hair in the most perfect facsimile of chaos he could achieve.

In the mirror his hair stuck out in every direction. His head looked like a rising sun of infinite rays. Infinite, greasy rays. He sniffed. He smelled like Sarah's hair cream- flowers and glycerin. He sat on the closed toilet and lit a cigarette. He watched himself in the mirror as he smoked. Sam had a Roman nose and what he liked to think of as mournful eyes. They were dark and sunken, but more often made him look in need of sleep than mournful. He winked as he inhaled and ashed in the sink. If he knew Marjorie, she would offer to cut his hair. She wouldn't be able to resist correcting such a catastrophe.

That evening Sam climbed stairs to the elevated subway platform with a bottle of wine under his arm. He watched the passersby below. He watched a woman a few blocks off. She was smoking, but at this distance all he saw was her hand fluttering between her side and her mouth, as if she were lightly and compulsively touching her fingers to her lips. She was walking a dog that looked like a small, hairless pig. Sam imagined he could hear it wheeze and snuffle as it walked. Sarah's mother had a dog like this. He would meet Sarah's mother tomorrow. He would meet Sarah's mother's dog tomorrow. It seemed to Sam that there was a great promise of commitment in meeting someone's mother's dog and he wasn't sure he was prepared for it.

He saw the woman drop her cigarette on the sidewalk and hoped the small, wheezery dog would eat it.

The station shook and a train-propelled breeze blew in. The train that would take him to Marjorie's apartment arrived.

Sam felt lost in time as he arrived at Myrtle Avenue and Marjorie buzzed him into what used to be his apartment.

"Who is it?" she asked through the intercom. Her voice sounded far-off and Sam imagined a string between two tin can telephones. "It's Sam," he said. This is my house, he did not say. The buzzer went off like an alarm and Sam walked inside. The stairwell had the anticipatory scent of a dinner party- food on the stove and women's perfume.

Marjorie opened the door.

"Nice to see you, stranger," she said. Sam kissed her cheek. He saw the line of ghostly indentations along her ear where there had once been many earrings. Marjorie looked him up and down and Sam thought he saw her control a shudder as she came to his hair.

"Nice to see you too." This was going to work out fine.

They went inside and Sam saw the printed sheets on the walls of the living room that he had nailed there when they'd first moved in. He remembered how they rounded and filled like sails when the heat vents in the floor were on. There was a rosy colored rug on the floor that Sam had never seen before. What was it doing there? They were not people who had rugs, Sam thought. Boring, legitimate people had rugs; they were too hip and unsettled for anything but bare floors. Sam eyed the rug over his shoulder as he followed Marjorie to the kitchen.

Joan and Dennis were bickering at the table.

"You don't have the culinary sense of a chicken," Joan said.

"I'm just saying, my mother always took the pork chops out after thirty minutes." Dennis said. "They continue to cook at the table."

"You can continue to cook at the table. Hello Sam!"

"Hello." Sam nodded.

Joan had gigantic arms that sagged like hammocks of flesh between her shoulder and elbow. The first time Sam had seen her cut hair he'd been hypnotized by them; they swayed back and forth, the under-flesh sometimes slapping against her station mirror if she wheeled around quickly.

"Good to see you," she said. Joan wore a black and white polka-dotted dress with ruffles at the neck and hem. Sam felt its crush as she hugged him. He was surprised by the way her heft created such a comforting embrace. He was pretty sure Joan hated him.

"Dennis," Sam extended a hand to Dennis, who was setting the table. He had a pinched face and wore glasses with a wide wingspan. He extended a hand full of silverware for Sam to shake.

"It looks ready," Marjorie said. "Why don't we sit down?" She brought serving bowls of applesauce and red cabbage, several bottles of wine, to the oval table. She bent at the waist to place them and her black hair swung to conceal her face like a curtain. She wore a black sweater and silver earrings, something Sam knew she did when she was playing at being a grownup. Sam felt impressed with himself for noticing this. He hadn't known he could still notice things about her. They sat at far ends of the table.

They opened the wine.

"A toast!" Marjorie said. "To old friends!"

"And old lovers!" Dennis said.

"Here, here!" added Joan.

Marjorie stared them down. "Behave," she said.

Sam clinked his glass against the others. One, two, three.

They drank the wine.

Sam managed only one bite of pork chop before realizing he would not be able to eat his dinner. He cut up small pieces and pushed them under the cabbage, burying them there. To compensate for not eating he brought the wine to his mouth again and again. He felt the alcohol squeeze on his brain like a firm hand. It was a familiar caress. He poured another glass.

"They can't change it," Joan said. "Coney Island is seedy, that's the whole point. What fun would it be if there weren't people like Sam puking on the boardwalk?"

They were back to this. Joan seemed delighted to have negotiated their return.

"Why don't you like roller coasters, Sam?" Dennis asked. Lamplight glinted off his glasses.

"I know why," Joan said. "You're a control freak and you don't like that you

can't get off once they strap you in."

"No, no, no," said Dennis, getting excited. "He had a traumatic childhood experience where he got lost in an amusement park. He waited by the rollercoaster for hours and his father never came to find him."

"Or! Or," Joan said, "His father did find him, and made him ride it twelve times in a row."

"Do you ever get sick while you're still on the rollercoaster?" Marjorie asked. "I sometimes wonder what happens when people do that. Is that a terrible thing to say?"

Joan and Dennis reassured her that it was not a terrible thing to say.

Sam said, "I don't like them because they make me sick. After. Afterwards they make me feel sick." He ran a hand over his hair. He hoped this would draw attention to it. It felt as if it were wilting.

Marjorie nodded and returned to her dinner. Joan and Dennis looked disappointed. Sam realized there was a reason people went to dinner parties in twos. It was important to have someone there to squeeze your knee under the table when someone made an ass of himself and you couldn't laugh out loud; it was particularly important if the ass was you. Sarah would be at her parents' house right now, in her childhood bedroom. There was something nice about imagining her, cross-legged on a too-small bed with her sister. Her sister would be talking about the wedding and Sarah would nod and grasp her sister's hand in her earnest way. What would Sarah talk about? Sam didn't know. Would they call Patt-with-two-t's? Would Patt understand?

"How's work?" Sam asked. They worked at a Williamsburg salon, informally know as The Head Shop. Let's talk about cutting hair, Sam thought. Try to ignore this debacle while talking about hair. He'd caught Joan staring at him a few times, but it was getting late and he didn't have the time to wait for her to say something. Sam wondered if Marjorie was drunk. He had never been able to tell when she was and when she wasn't.

Marjorie said, "A bald man with a tattooed head came into the shop yesterday. He sat down in my chair and said, no cut, just a wash."

Joan snickered. She was opening another bottle of wine. Dennis had finished his cabbage and now forked Joan's off her plate.

"What did you do?" Sam asked.

"I just shampooed his head for a half hour," she said. "What else could I do?"

"Have you ever had someone come in with a wig?" Dennis asked Marjorie. "That's the worst."

Marjorie's mouth was full. Her eyes rounded and she moved her hand in circles to show that she was finishing. Her fingers glanced off the wine glass and knocked it over. Red wine seeped into the tablecloth, a slow spread.

"Shit," she said, her mouth still full. She used a paper napkin to sop up the wine. It pinked as she blotted. Her brow furrowed and her cheeks flushed; she

scrubbed with determination. She caught Sam and the others staring at her. She began to laugh.

She laughed and they laughed and she could not stop. Her eyes were narrowed and beginning to tear. She threw the pink napkin at the table and it landed in the applesauce.

"Oh god," she said. "I'm a mess."

She wiped her eyes and looked at the three of them.

"Isn't anyone going to pour me another glass of wine?" she said, and Joan did. Marjorie's eye makeup was smudged in a way that Sam couldn't help but remember; mornings in bed her eyes had looked like that. Sarah wore no makeup, and her face always looked the same in the morning as it had the night before. Sam took comfort in this. He enjoyed waking up and thinking, I remember you.

The others had finished their food, but there was still a good deal of pork chop on Sam's plate and no more room beneath the cabbage to hide it. He discreetly transferred several bites from his mouth to his napkin. Beneath the table he put them in his front pocket with his cell phone.

Meals finished, everyone leaned back in their chairs, wine glasses in hand. Sam pulled his cigarettes from his back pocket, the cardboard container crushed almost flat.

"Oh, please don't smoke in here," Marjorie said.

Joan and Dennis looked at each other meaningfully.

"Are you serious?" Sam said. "We've smoked in here for years."

Marjorie winced when he said we. "I quit," she said.

"You what?"

"I quit," she said, louder this time, sitting up straight. She blinked twice.

This upset Sam though he wasn't sure why. He didn't like that things should change without him. That this apartment should be different now, that she should be different. He had always imagined that things would stay the way he left them.

"Marjorie, that's ridiculous. I can still smell the stink of it all over this place. In the wallpaper and in the rug."

Marjorie bit her lip.

Dennis cleared his throat, "Sam, I think you should support Marjorie's decisions. Have you thought that maybe you're actually expressing your own frustration at being unable to quit?"

Joan nodded, "Or maybe being forced into thinking about your smoking has raised uncomfortable issues about your own mortality."

Dennis said, "Or maybe you don't like that you don't have any control over Marjorie anymore."

Marjorie put her face in her hands, "Dennis, that's not right at all."

Sam felt the booze in his arms and legs now. A tingling ran through them that made him feel both energized and weak. Like if he squeezed his hand he

would not be able to make it into a fist for the shakiness.

"No," he said, his voice assuming an inappropriate levity, "No, it's okay. Dennis, because you're an ass. Really, you are. And Joan, I, well—" what was there to say? "I don't like your dress very much." Sam wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Joan stared at him. Her mouth was slightly open

"Fuck you," Dennis said, standing up.

"No, fuck you, Dennis!" Sam said, and punched at the air joyfully.

Joan stayed still. Dennis's eyes grew huge in disbelief.

"You're an inarticulate moron." he said "Joan, we're leaving," and Joan got up. "Goodnight Marjorie," she said. Marjorie nodded. Her hands were still on her face, her wide, dark eyes just visible above her fingertips.

"Goodnight Joan and Dennis!" Sam said, almost singing.

"Goodnight," Dennis told Marjorie. He turned back to Sam. "Fuck you," he said again. "We're leaving right now." And they did. Joan's dress rustled as she made her way to the door.

Sam was still standing. He looked down. There were constellations of grease on his jeans where the oiliness of the pork chop in his pocket was seeping through.

"Was that necessary?" Marjorie said, the words wet and muffled sounding, as if they were being filtered through her fingers. "I should have known better than to try to do this." Of course you did, Sam heard, and realized he'd fucked up. Of course you did. He thought briefly of Sarah's look of perpetual surprise.

"I'm sorry," he said, and sat down in his chair.

"I'm drunk," he said.

Marjorie rubbed her face with her hands. With Joan and Dennis gone, Sam felt odd being at the far end of the table from her. She picked some red cabbage up with her fingers and put it in her mouth. She chewed and stared at him.

"What the hell is going on with your hair?" she asked.

Sam touched his head with his hand and began laughing.

"I need a haircut," he said. "Oh, Marjorie, you have no idea how badly I need a haircut."

She nodded. "I know you hate pork chops," she said.

"Give me a fucking cigarette," she said, and laughed. He threw her the pack. She lit one with a long table match and threw them back to him.

"Let's go fix your hair."

The bathroom was cool. Sam stuck his head under the shower spray until the grease broke and his hair was clean. His collar was wet. He toweled his head and sat on a furry bathmat on the floor. Part of him wished that Marjorie would have kicked him out. He wondered if it were a good idea for her to cut his hair while drunk, but then realized it could not possibly look any worse.

Marjorie sat on the lip of the bathtub, one knee on either side of his shoulders.

She snapped a small pair of silver scissors open and closed twice. She always did this before cutting, Sam had seen her in the shop.

She put her hands in his hair and Sam felt something in his shoulders go weak and loose. Marjorie didn't speak when she cut. She took piece by piece of his hair between two fingers, slid them along the length of it, then snipped. Inch long curls of Sam's hair dropped to the floor. They stuck on his shirt and tickled his neck. Soft pieces fell in his eyes. He would have picked them from his eyelashes, but he did not want to move his arms. He exhaled upwards, and the hair fell to the floor.

There was migrating pressure on his scalp as Marjorie tugged at his hair. He tried to focus on the sounds of the snipping. He could smell the vinyl of the shower curtain. She cut the hair at the back of his neck and her fingers felt strong and purposeful as they moved along his nape. Sam thought it was funny that faltering Marjorie could be so confident in this one small thing.

"Done," she said.

"How does it look?" he asked, without moving.

"Let's see," she said, and they stood. Sam thought about how he always felt drunker standing up than he did sitting. His vision spun then settled, like a flicked coin falling to its side.

The bathroom was too small for two people to be standing like this.

"It's better than before," she said.

"That's good," Sam said. "Thank you." They stood another moment, both listening to the slow drip of the showerhead. Sam swayed on his feet and she put her hands on his shoulders to steady him. She kissed him and he tasted cigarette smoke on her tongue, which is how she had always tasted, before.

Sam didn't know what to say. He watched her stare at her hands.

"I'm sorry," Sam said. "I'm sorry." And he realized that he was.

He felt uneasy in his stomach. Suddenly, he realized he needed to pee. But he couldn't say that now. There were many things he was supposed to say now and that couldn't be one of them.

"I need to go," he said.

"Of course you do," she said.

And Sam left.

Outside, the pavement smelled wet, recently washed, and the air smelled like yeast. Sam had nowhere to go. A red car idled at the red light and the rumbling bass inside shook its doorframes. Sam bounced his head in time and felt a disproportionate sadness when the car drove away, leaving him in silence.

He walked circles around the block, which was no longer his block. Some of the storefronts were the same but the laundromat he used to go to was closed and there were two new restaurants that hadn't been there before. These things changed quickly. All Sam wanted to do was go home, but their apartment was empty and he knew he'd feel worse once he got there. He wanted to tell Sarah

about what had happened. He thought about calling her, to let her know he'd be there tomorrow, but why? She was already expecting him. He'd done this before, called purposelessly when she was away. She always laughed. "Where are you?" she'd ask. He was usually in their apartment, bored. The zoo, he'd say. The moon.

Sam still needed to pee. There was a sad-looking tree, skinny and improbably tall, in a concrete well of mulch. This was as good a spot as any, Sam thought. He unzipped his pants.

"Woop woop!" When the policeman's siren went off across the street, the first thing Sam thought was that it was a joyous sort of sound. "Woop woop!"

Had he been parked there the whole time?

"Sir, please pull up your pants, Sir."

Sam thought the officer looked tired. He suddenly felt more drunk than he had when he was alone.

"Officer, this tree is on its way out," Sam said. "Look at it. I bet you this tree will not make it through the winter."

The officer looked at Sam, and looked at the tree. "It's a sorry-looking tree," he said. "But I'm afraid I'm going to have to write you a citation."

Sam thought about it. He zipped his pants. "Okay," he said.

They crossed the street and the officer opened the door to the squad car. "Take a seat," he said. Sam climbed into the back of the car and the officer into the front. He rifled through a stack of citation papers. WFMU was playing softly on the radio.

Sam wrapped his fingers around the grille that separated him from the officer. "This is a good station," he said.

"It is," said the officer. "It's the best."

It was warm inside the cab and Sam felt sleepy. It smelled like carbon paper and the leathery upholstery.

"Hey, do I get one phone call?" Sam asked. This was how it worked in the movies. Sam liked the weight a single phone call would have.

"You haven't been arrested, Sir. We're not going to hold you."

"Oh," Sam said. "Right. So you wouldn't mind if I made a call then?"

The officer shrugged. "Be my guest. Just keep it down."

Sam took out his phone and dialed a number he knew by heart. As the line rang, Sam sniffed. His phone smelled like pork chop.

"WKCT," said the voice on the other end of the phone.

"Hello, WKCT?" said Sam. "I'd like to make a dedication."

"Any particular song?" the voice asked.

"No, no they all sound about the same to me," Sam said. "Pick me a good one though, okay? And can you say it's for Sarah in Madison, Connecticut? From Sam in Brooklyn, New York? I'll be there tomorrow. Can you say that too?"

"That will play within the hour," the voice said.

"Great. Thanks," Sam said. The policeman looked at him over his shoulder.

"Hey, can I speak with Patt? I've got some questions for him," Sam said.

"I'll need to put you on hold," the voice said. "There's a wait this time of night."

"That's fine," Sam said, and he heard the click as he was transferred to another line. The police officer rolled Sam's citation into a scroll and passed it through the grille. He rubbed his stubble with one hand.

"Pay this within thirty days," he said. "You have one more minute with that phone and then you've got to get out of here."

Sam nodded. Sam was on hold

"Tell me all about it," said the hold music. "Tell me all about it."

Sam ran a hand through his new hair cut.

"Tell me all about it."