



DAYPARTS

VICKI MAYK

I'm a night owl.

I know this because I hear my father say it to his mother on a Sunday visit to her shabby brick house in the Lawrenceville section of Pittsburgh. I'm 8. "She'd stay up all night if we let her," he says as he sits stirring his coffee in the kitchen. My Polish grandmother—my Bupka—sits in her rocking chair by the window. My aunts are fluttering around the kitchen like a pair of butterflies, moving swiftly and lightly from stove to refrigerator to table.

I'm eating forkfuls of what I call "jimmie cake," a heavy pound cake with thick chocolate fudge icing peppered with the chocolate sprinkles we call jimmies. My grandmother says something to my father in Polish. I know it's about me because I hear the word "Vick-cha"—my nickname—in the middle of a string unintelligible Polish words. My father answers her in Polish and I'm guessing it's about my sleeping habits.

"How come you don't like to go to sleep?" my Aunt Ida asks, pausing to

refill my glass with ginger ale. I know she doesn't really expect an answer. But if she did, I could have told her.

It's the radio.

For as long as I could remember, my father fell asleep listening to the radio. Tuning in to KDKA—"1020 on the AM dial"—as he got ready for bed was as much a part of his night-time ritual as brushing his teeth. Because he left for work at 5 a.m., he went to bed most nights by 9, hours before my mother. That was exactly the time when the talk show "Party Line" came on the air, hosted by a husband and wife team named Ed and Wendy King.

On nights when I can't sleep thanks to an over-active imagination that conjures ghouls in my closet, I am allowed to lie down on my mother's side of the bed until I get drowsy. Lying there listening to KDKA, I develop a fondness for having low murmuring voices lulling me to sleep. Soon Dad's bed-time radio habit becomes my radio habit. Soon I have my own radio playing softly on my nightstand.

I love listening to "Party Line," a pre-cursor to today's talk radio. It is an anomaly—a call-in show where we never hear the callers. There was no pre-screening of calls in the 1950s and 1960s. Ed and Wendy picked up the phone, taking their chances with what they found on the other end of the line. If there is a heavy breather or an obscene caller, we, the listeners, never know. All we ever hear is a paraphrasing of a caller's question repeated by the Kings. Years later, a story circulated that Wendy King once received

a risqué proposition when she picked up the receiver and, with customary aplomb, turned it over to her husband, saying, "Ed, it's for you."

The world filtered through "Party Line" held no political arguments or examination of world affairs. It was a party filled with small talk. Usually the questions from listeners were mundane, with people seeking information to settle an argument with a neighbor or spouse. In those days before the internet, asking for information via a radio station broadcast at 50,000 watts was just as effective.

Every night there was a trivia question called the "Party Pretzel." Callers who got the right answer—as many as can get through on the phone—all receive a prize. One night I'm sure I know the answer and keep my Dad awake as I use the blue Princess phone on my mother's night stand to dial the call-in number—Express 1, 1-0, 3-8—as I desperately try to get my call through. Most of the time the dull beep of a busy signal greets me.

I love the pieces of trivia that I pick up listening to the Kings. One day at recess, I find myself telling Sister Margaret Frances what I learned last night about the history of the City of Pittsburgh. As I'm prattling on about Fort Pitt, Sister gazes at me intently through her wire rimmed bifocals; the line dividing the lens crosses over the middle of her dark pupil. She seems to be fascinated, but as soon as I pause, she says sternly, "Very interesting. But what are you doing staying up that late listening to the radio?"

The trivia and chat are not really what keeps me awake. It's the stories.

The Kings ask listeners to write in and share stories, choosing a different theme each month. Stories of patriotism for July 4th, tales of how married couples met, reminiscences of favorite meals and recipes, memories of times gone by. By the time Ed is done with them, even the most commonplace story sounds eloquent. Ed knows how to tell them, his warm and expressive voice drawing pictures with broad strokes that my imagination fills in with color. These become my bedtime stories, better than anything by the Brothers Grimm.

The ghost stories for Halloween are the best. Every night during the month of October, Ed King tells creepy tales. Some listeners say the stories scare them too much and ask if Ed could give some kind of signal when he is about to launch into one of his supernatural yarns. He obliges, choosing a piece of ominous creepy music that he plays as an introduction. The music becomes a signature sound and wary listeners hurry to turn down the radio as soon they hear it.

I should know better. It is easy to scare me. But I love to listen to Ed tell a story. Some nights my mother finds me asleep with every light blazing in my bedroom. A few nights she finds me awake with all the lights on at midnight on a school night, unable to chase away the demons that the radio has conjured. After such nights, my parents forbid me to listen. Eventually we strike a compromise and I plug my ears as soon as the creepy music announces the start of another story. That lasts one or two nights at most. Then I go back to listening.

Sometimes I can't blame the wakefulness on fright. I just like listening to the radio. I know I'm really in trouble when I hear the Kings sign off. When I hear a familiar jingle, "turn the radio on, turn the lights down low, listen to the Jaaaack Wheeler Show," I know it's midnight. I know what my dad said is true.

I'm a night owl.



"You'd better eat. We have to leave for school in 15 minutes."

My mother is bustling around the kitchen. She finishes packing my lunch box and stops to take a swig of coffee before making her own lunch. I barely hear her admonition to eat and nibble absentmindedly on my toast. What's got my attention at 7 o'clock in the morning is the cast of characters talking to Rege Cordic, the morning DJ on KDKA.

"*Why, it's Brrrunhilda,*" Rege says in his dulcet voice, rolling his Rs for emphasis in a well-modulated baritone that never rises above a soothing level.

"*Hello, hon,*" says Brunhilda, one of the regular characters on Cordic & Company. I know exactly what Brunhilda looks like, even if I've never seen her. Rege calls Brunhilda "our rotund friend" and says she has to use the freight elevator. Although her exact weight has never been shared, I imagine she's at least 300 pounds. Maybe that's because she once complained to Rege that she got her spike heel caught in one of Pittsburgh's street car tracks and pulled up 100 feet of track before she knew what was happening.

Brunhilda is one long-running fat joke, but it's the early Sixties, years before I'll know about fat shaming. As soon as I hear Brunhilda's voice, I'm already giggling. She's guilty of misusing words in a heavy Pittsburgh accent—making mistakes that even I, with my 9-year-old vocabulary, can recognize.

"I was practicing yogurt last week," Brunhilda says. *"I was standing on my head."*

"I think you mean yoga," Rege says.

"Yes, yogurt. A heavy-set person like me has no idea how heavy they are until they stand on their head," Brunhilda explains. *"I had a headache for days."*

I'm laughing, staring into space, imagining the whole scene, all the while clutching my half-eaten triangle of toast.

Mom joins me at the table and she's laughing too—in between taking the last few drags on her Kent cigarette. Suddenly she exclaims, "We're going to be late," and she's hustling me out the door to her coral and white Pontiac. It's time for our morning commute—dropping me off at St. James School before she heads to her part-time job at The Foremost, a ladies clothing store in the waning days of Wilkinsburg, Pa.'s, once-thriving downtown.

As soon as I hit the vinyl car seat and Mom turns the key, I switch on the radio to catch some more of Cordic & Company. I'm just in time to hear Omicron, a regular visitor from Venus who is temporarily living on Earth. Omicron has a robotic kind of patter and refers to Rege as "Cordicron."

Omicron reminds me of one of my favorite TV shows, "My Favorite Martian."

My mother claims that one of her distant cousins plays one of Cordic's characters—Carman Monoxide, a taxidermist. I want to meet this cousin, who seems as famous as a movie star to me because he is on radio. If I meet him, I won't tell him that he's not my favorite character. Brunhilda is. I also like the garbage man who's been featured in "Better Homes and Garbage."

Mom turns on to Rebecca Avenue and I'm hoping she'll have to go around the block to find a parking place to drop me off. That will buy me another three minutes listening to Rege. I'm out of luck. Someone's just pulled out and Mom slides the Pontiac into the space as easily as she spreads the peanut butter on the sandwich tucked away in my lunch.

I linger, trying to hear the end of the routine with Omicron.

"You're going to be late," Mom says, clicking off the radio and and landing me solidly back on earth.



My best friend at St. James is Barbara Stone. She's big, blonde, and a boisterous counterpoint to my goodie-two-shoes demeanor. We're in love with The Beatles. We're also enamored of a DJ on KQV Radio named Chuck Brinkman. KQV is the "official" Beatles station in Pittsburgh. When The Beatles come to play a concert in the Civic Arena, Chuck gets to introduce them—and this makes him a celebrity almost equal to the mop tops in our 11-year-old eyes.

Chuck's 7 p.m. to midnight show on "Groovy Q-V" is the soundtrack to my weekend sleepovers at Barbara's. I prefer staying over at her house. Mr. Stone works the night shift at J&L Steel, so after Mrs. Stone goes to bed, we're basically unsupervised. This never happens at my house. After the regimented atmosphere of Catholic elementary school, always under the nuns' scrutiny, the Stones' house offers freedom.

Prank phone calls ("Is your refrigerator running?"). Staying up all hours. Gathering every empty glass bottle in the house, from aspirin containers to soda bottles, so we can drop them out the bedroom window into the back alley just to hear them crash. Poring over issues of *Sixteen* magazine (which I will not be allowed to have for another two years). These are just a few of the things we do when I'm sleeping over at Barbara's.

In summer 1965, Chuck Brinkman goes on vacation, leaving two of his loyal listeners—Barbara and me—bereft. But Barbara hatches an idea. When he returns the following week, we're going to welcome him home with a cake. Barbara's mother agrees to drive us to the KQV studios downtown. On Friday night, we make a devil's food cake, laboriously spelling out "Welcome Back Chuck" in wobbly red icing letters on pristine white frosting. On Saturday night, Mrs. Stone piles us into the car. Barbara balances the cake in its white box on her lap. I'm clutching my copy of John Lennon's book *In His Own Write*, which I plan to have Chuck autograph. This makes complete sense to me, since Chuck is the closest person to a Beatle that I'm likely to meet.

KQV's DJs work behind a huge window under the gaze of passersby on Smithfield Street. Trolleys rattle by, drowning out the music broadcast from giant speakers. Barbara and I pause outside, starstruck, watching Chuck at the microphone. "Come on, girls," Mrs. Stone says, herding us into the building. Barbara, who is 11 going on 20, informs her mother, "We're going in by ourselves," leaving Mrs. Stone in the lobby. Inside, I'm just a tagalong as my friend marches up the receptionist and announces, "We have a gift for Chuck." We're asked to wait until Chuck has a break. We sit down in chairs lined up beneath the black-and-white portraits of the station's on-air personalities. "When he comes out, we're going to say, 'Welcome back, Chuck,'" Barbara coaches me.

Before we can practice, Chuck walks into the reception area. A shock of wavy hair hangs over his forehead and his basset hound eyes have bags under them. The beginnings of a paunch sits above his belt. Barbara and I jump to our feet. "Welcome back, Chuck," we chorus. Actually, it's mostly Barbara who can be heard. I'm speaking in what Sister Jean Marie, who teaches music at St. James, calls a "little baby voice" when we're not singing loud enough. It's a peep, barely able to be heard.

Chuck graciously accepts the cake, asks us our names and where we go to school. Spying the book in my hand, he asks, "Do you want me to sign your book?" He does it with a flourish. But then he has to hustle to get back to the studio before the news break ends.

As the car barrels home on the Parkway East, we tune in. Just after “Ferry Cross the Mersey” by Gerry and the Pacemakers ends, Chuck announces, “I want to thank Barbara and Vicki for the cake.”

Clutching hands in the backseat, we squeal.



WLS...Chi-cah-go.

The familiar notes of the jingle wake me from sleep. I’m back at college. I must have been dreaming that I’m at home on break. Home, where I’m no longer happy to be the obedient only child spending my days with loving parents. Home, far from the boy I started dating just before finals. That sound, that familiar jingle, tells me that I’m really back in the Midwest, in the place that has become more of a home than the place where I grew up. I can hear the announcer as my mind sheds the last shards of sleep, falling like fragments of frosted glass from my consciousness.

Chicagoland weather...It’s 10 below in the Windy City.

I open my eyes and the room swims into focus. A pink dresser takes shape in the semi-darkness—my mother’s handiwork during my freshman year of high school. I’m in my room, at home in Pittsburgh. Disappointment creeps up my spine, settling in my chest. I’m hundreds of miles from my college friends, stranded at home until mid-January.

WLS....

I walk across the shag carpet and shuffle soundlessly to the top of the stairs in our split level. The kitchen is washed in light. My dad sits at

the counter, one leg tucked under him like a middle-aged flamingo. The newspaper is spread in front of him, opened to the sports section. The radio at this elbow crackles as a voice tells us that there’s no traffic yet at this hour on Lakeshore Drive.

Dad sees me. “Hey, Pookie. What are you doing up? It’s early.”

I descend the eight steps to the kitchen. The clock on the stove says it’s 5 a.m.; 4 a.m. if I was in Chicago.

“I thought I heard...” I wave my hand toward the radio. “Chicago...”

“Oh, yeah. I can get that station really late at night. Or early in the morning.”

I sit down across from him at the counter. He goes back to reading about the Steelers. I pull my pajama legs down to cover my cold bare feet and rest my forearms on the table, crossing them to make a nest that pillows my head. I close my eyes and listen. There’s a commercial for Jewel playing now.

“Chicken is 69 cents a pound.”

We don’t have Jewel grocery stores in Pittsburgh. But right now, I’m in Chicago, where my friends are.

In 10 minutes, I’m dozing, drifting off to the sound of a commercial for Super Jock Larry Lujack.



I spent most of my life enthralled by the sound of disembodied radio voices filling the silence in my car, my bedroom, my life. It was inevita-

ble that I'd fall in love with a radio DJ. After graduating from college, I'm hired by WGAN-TV in Portland, Maine. It's fall 1976, and Jimmy Carter is about to be elected president. I cast an absentee ballot before moving from Pennsylvania to Maine.

WGAN was part of a media monopoly: the same family owned the Portland Press Herald newspaper, the TV station, and its sister radio station. All three entities shared the same building on Congress Street, although the newspaper people entered through a different door on the opposite side of the building from the TV and radio staffs. I'm the new promotions manager, which means it's my job to think of ways to get viewers to tune in to our newscast and the CBS network programs that we broadcast.

On my second week on the job, I have to deliver taped promotional spots to the radio station—on something called carts, the cousin of 8 tracks—hyping our weather man's snowblower giveaway. I take the stairs to the third floor. Through the big glass window in the hall, I can see the guy at the mic doing the afternoon drive time show. He's wearing a headset over the peaked cap that's perched on top of his curly hair and has one thumb hooked on the pocket of his jeans as he introduces the next song. I hover outside the door waiting for the "on air" light to go off, signaling it's safe to step inside.

"If only you'd believe in miracles so would I..." I recognize the sound of the lead singer for Jefferson Starship.

The on-air light blinks out and I enter the studio. The DJ turns and I

see dimples and bright blue eyes. He removes his headset. In the background, Jefferson Starship sings, *"I can hear windmills and rainbows whenever you're talkin' to me..."*

"Wow. That's the biggest pot holder I've ever seen!"

It takes me a minute before I realize the DJ is gesturing toward the bright blue jumper I'm wearing. My cheeks are blazing. The jumper is a gift from my mother and it's made out of some kind of quilted fabric. Jesus. I realize that it *is* like the fabric they use to make potholders. This guy must think I'm an idiot. He notices my embarrassment. "No, no, I like it. It's different," he says, punctuating each no by waving both hands. There's a pause. "I'm Sean O'Neil."

I hand over the tape carts. "I'm Vicki. These are the promo spots for Bob O'Wrill's contest."

"I feel like swirling and dancing whenever you walk in with me (walk in with me)..."

Fortunately this is a long song. We exchange the usual "are you new here?" small talk. Sean turns back to the console as the song ends. I start to back out of the control room as he puts on his headphones. He holds a single finger toward me, the universal sign for "Wait a minute." In 30 seconds—all of radio is parsed out in minutes and seconds—he's segued to back-to-back commercials and turned back to me.

"Would you like to go out to dinner on Friday?"

And so it starts. Dinner on Friday turns into brunch on Sunday. Then it transitions into dinner on Tuesday. Soon we're seeing each other every day, at work and outside. I spend some of my breaks sitting in the control room with him. It's magic to be on this side of a broadcast. Every one of my childhood fantasies about radio is coming true. I'm no longer just a listener, I'm an insider. I head home at the end of the day, listening to Sean in my car. One night he tells me to be sure to listen to the end of his show.

"That's all for today. Coming up next, the news. And now, this is going out to someone special from me." It's the Captain and Tenille. *"I've never wanted to love someone, the way that I want to love you."*

This is better than watching Chuck Brinkman through the glass on Smithfield Street. I'm as giddy as my 13-year-old self once was listening to love songs on the radio. I'm listening to my boyfriend on the radio and he's playing love songs just for me. OK, a few thousand other people are listening too. I'm a naïve 22, so it doesn't seem hokey. Just sweet—the equivalent of a boy writing you a poem.

After Sean and I date for six months, I come across mail addressed to Dwight somebody. "Who's this?" I ask.

"Well, that used to be my name."

"Used to be?"

He tells me that he's had his name legally changed to his on-air moniker, Sean O'Neil. But it's the first of several incidents revealing that the line be-

tween radio personality and real-life person are blurred. The smoky voice so mesmerizing on the air is capable of telling me lies. Lies about unpaid bills, where he went to college, and whether he's divorced from his first wife.

One story is true: He's a Vietnam veteran. His nightmares and an increasing need to drink turn out to be symptoms of something that years later I will learn is called post-traumatic stress disorder. By the time our relationship ends, he's been evicted from his apartment and followed me from Maine to Pittsburgh, where I'd returned to take a new job. He gets a job as a weekend on-air personality. Behind the microphone on the radio is the only place where he knows who he really is.

I get over the relationship. What I never got over was how it changed radio for me. The mystery of the person behind the disembodied voice was gone. Some of the magic went with it.