

Beyond the Voice

by arlene ang

We might as well be honest: we're talking about the two of us here.

No one, not even the cameraman, had any idea even after all these years. For more than a decade we'd been bringing the six o'clock news into a medium-almost-major market region. That means thousands and thousands of living rooms, kitchens, refrigerators, and wherever else people keep televisions these days. We still get a thrill out of holding our smile. *Goodeveningpeople. Welcome to Pleasant Vista Television. We make the bad news sound good.*

Back in the early days we waited tables at Cherchez La Femme, and were still struggling to find our voice. We paid our analyst, Dr. Porter, to call us Mila and Sussi. We paid him separately so he made twice the money, and we felt proud of that. Not only did he help us through our speech barrier, but he also prodded us to understand why we were so unhappy with French cuisine. We often tired of listening to complaints about lumps in the sauce, in the turkey stuffing, in the coverings on the leatherette bar stools. We had to wear a green cap that said, *I'm Monique, your maitre d'.*

"Jake may be paying you to act Monique. But the thing is you actually look Monique." So quipped Dr. Porter, six months into our treatment, around the time we started showing up together for our little talks. We gradually stopped feeling guilty about feeling guilty, and about leaving each other notes throughout the day. And to think that, having grown up in a rough neighborhood, we could have turned out less shy, more inclined to liking getaway cars.

With a tape recorder, Dr. Porter managed to dig deeply into our communal fears and recovered much that we had forgotten about our flight from an exciting tour of Kodaikanal.

His words were prophetic: "This is where it all begins. And please don't forget to make me a reservation for Friday."

On the surface, there wasn't much to the touring incident, which occurred when we were barely into our twenties. A Hindu businessman asked us to visit his small village and talk to a thousand or so women about the importance of science education. Initially, we both said yes. It seemed like a good chance to show off our Westside Story diphthongs. However, some mysterious telegrams led us to believe that the businessman was from the fishnet trade, and the thought of so many future genetic engineers manipulating the stockings market began to seriously upset us. Oh yes, and the large, expectant audience. Our vision still goes all blurry with the thought of it.

We left the hotel and moved to another city. We even covered our tracks and gave a fake forwarding address. Sometimes we still worry about running again into that kind businessman. We worry he might ask our hand in marriage. We worry we might say yes again.

Miss Moyle, our high school speech instructor, would never have gotten into our predicament. For one, she would've been wearing a practical swimsuit under her street clothes as part of the escape plan. She used to be in the army as a swimming coach. We'd always believed that something about the army makes people take their life by the minute. We could never tell Dr. Porter about Miss Moyle and her stopwatch of terror. She particularly enjoyed timing speeches. Every time she shouted "Halt!" it felt like a personal gun salute to napalm. One of the reasons the school kept her despite the usual student breakdowns was she could squeeze a total of seventy-six extemporizations in less than an hour. A record that actually made it into the Guinness World Book. On the other hand, Dr. Porter never made it to the army because of a weak back. This, of course, didn't

stop him from using a loud cuckoo clock to tell us that our time was up.

It was, however, Dr. Porter who encouraged us to pursue our dream to host a shopping channel that specialized in balaclava fashion. He was so enthusiastic about it that, in order not to disappoint him, we forged our resumé and landed the job. We actually adapted Miss Moyle's telemimetic techniques to help us sell hats, capes, coffee mugs, even tennis shoes. And at BFT (Balaclava Fashion Today) we perfected our broadcast voice, which wasn't easy.

Willie, an old Vaudevillian, schooled us in vocal choreography. The trick was to deliver lead and backup at the same time. Willie must have suspected our secret. "Now, with your other left foot pick up that dangling microphone." That's how he spoke to us, and Willie wasn't even his real name.

BFT was also our first taste of fame. It's a myth that only hermits shop via television, and we frequently met customers right out on Main Street, despite our dark glasses and ascots. We always let them buy us a cappuccino in exchange for a few words. Mostly, we just made it up, whatever it was that we told them about our health regimen, our upcoming contract negotiation, where we lived. Whenever we started to lose our time sense or forget how to safely rent a car, Willie taught us to mingle in this way.

Dr. Porter knew nothing of Willie. He didn't yet guess we could be less than honest. It was rather quaint, in a cocker spaniel kind of way, how he took to asking our advice about current slang and hip diners. He had us convinced we could make the jump to broadcast journalism based purely on our inferiority complex. After all, he crooned, didn't we love the smell of ink? And there's plenty of red ink spilt in any tv newsroom. Black and red ink are metaphors. We knew that but we didn't care. We continued to read nothing but pastels into his homemade blots.

It's not like Dr. Porter was using us. He just took advantage of how we had no personal life. He knew from our previous sessions that we could talk his portable tape recorder into low-bat and defy anything that alerted us of time. Eventually, he announced his retirement and found us a job—undergoing the initial interview himself—as newscaster at the Pleasant Vista Television where he happened to be the major shareholder.

We wish we could say that Dr. Porter had made a pass at us. But he didn't. He was a faithful cat-owner up to the end when he changed his phone number and moved with his twenty-pound tabby to Helsinki. We still send him postcards of our town occasionally to remind him of his humble origins.

Fact is when we missed writing each other notes, Dr. Porter would always be able to center our attention. We could wryly send him twenty postcards in one day when we felt particularly blue and out of little pink pills.

Sometimes we still find notes addressed to us as Sussi or Mila—which we both deny having written. Here is one we found in the left inner pocket of a thriftstore purchase, in that unmistakable houndstooth hand: *How now, brown cow*. This only confirmed for us the naughty origins of our nightly, nifty sign-off, which heretofore we had attributed to our serious (oops) drug addiction.

In any case, by then we were much more addicted to the sound of applause, oftentimes pushing the applause button ourselves in the middle of freak carwash accident reports. Our ratings soared. We received so much acclaim for our applause-button pushing techniques that it has become a two-year course in many of our best universities.

Now what did we do with our fame? We came back to where it all began: Cherchez La Femme. It was grimier than before, the same old carpet more wine-stained. They had a new Monique. We'd only planned to talk about old times with Jake, or Studgers as we liked to call him. We slapped a cold hand on his back: "Damn, but this place still stinks!" The way his mustache thinned over his grimace reminded us suddenly of Miss Moyle and how she would never be proud of us.

Miraculously, the local big market television outfit was there to record all of this. One producer gave us the thumbs up sign, but we saw the envy in her brow. A crowd cheered us on to change their world, their hopes, and the fiber content in their diet. But it was the applause of the diners, the regular drunkards that set us off, and we set off one banana flambé after another.

"Here's to Dr. Porter," we shouted, "wherever he is."

Studgers looked grimmer by the minute as if to say, *I'm the real authority here. Look at me! Notice me!*

Later, we found someone had burned down his time clock, the orange one with the personalized time cards. Beside it on the ground lay a crumpled green cap that said *I'm Monique, your maitre d'*. We had the cameraman zoom on that, then voiced-over, quietly: "Cut."

In the back alley we tried to give a bum some food. He made the universal anti-vampire sign and cackled, "Please, no more butter."

