

Scanner

by Bill Floyd

The Bearcat 101 was a police scanner popular with a certain type during in the 1970s. Daddy was that exact type. I found the Bearcat in his apartment after he passed. His illness was a common one, the process gradual, implacable. No red and blue lights flashing, no voices over the radio speaking in code.

None of us kids could ever make much sense of the voices on the scanner, voices that often seemed to be speaking some other language altogether, an alpha-numeric dialect known only to the solemn brotherhood of sheriffs and firemen. Daddy learned the codes for automobile accidents, and if the scene was within a twenty or thirty minute drive of our house, he'd pack all us kids into the Continental and off we'd go into the night. He'd wanted to be a cop when he was younger, but Mama had drawn a bright line. Most of his life he spent working for PPG, making fiberglass.

Mama wouldn't let Sammy go along after he started having nightmares. He was the youngest. Me and John used to give him shit for being such a pussy, and our sister, Marlene, would taunt him, too. She liked going along with Daddy, same as we did. When you told the other kids kids at school about these outings, they thought it just was the coolest thing. Wondered why their own daddies didn't do the same. Mrs. Wintergarten caught wind of our sojourns and called up the house and gave Mama an earful. Mama got defensive and suggested that she knew better how to raise her own kids than a social studies teacher ever would, but once she hung up the phone she lit into Daddy something fierce. His defense was, "They'll be driving themselves in a few years, they need to know what's real." But it had nothing to do with life lessons. We visited accident scenes the same as another family might go to the movies or a football game.

Daddy knew a lot of the deputies by name and sometimes they let us get up pretty close. At night you could only see bits and pieces.

Windowglass glittering on the pavement. The underside of a truck flipped into a ditch, complex as an insect turned on its shell. Hot smells. Fluids reflecting blue and red. Baffled and shaken drivers sitting on the shoulder, a squatting paramedic shining a pinlight in their eyes. Daddy explaining the treatments for concussions, fractures, internal injuries. A couple still trapped behind a crumpled hood and a splintered windshield, blinking against the glare. They couldn't help how scared they looked. Marlene with one hand gripping a belt loop at Daddy's waist, him explaining that they were hurt pretty bad. Something unguarded in his voice, something I couldn't recall hearing any other time.

Sammy would be sitting up in bed when we got home, watching quietly as John and I climbed into our bunks in the room we all shared. Sammy not asking, but listening intently as we discussed the scene. Caught between wishing he'd gone along and the memory of nightmares. Even when the excursion had been boring, we made out like it had been gruesome and dramatic.

I met my wife while we were both serving overseas. She's a nurse. She says no one dies instantly; that's just what they tell families to try and mitigate the impact. She said that when we were first dating, before she knew about Sammy. She's pretty straight up about most things, though, so I don't know if she'd have said anything different if she did know.

It was the year after he dropped out of school. He was in the passenger seat of a 2002 Jeep Cherokee with some of his stoner buddies. Not wearing his seatbelt. The driver took a turn too fast, overcorrected. The deputies whose names my old man knew used to use that same term, "overcorrected," like your initial mistake couldn't be rectified no matter how hard you tried.

If my wife is right, Sammy had some time, maybe just a few minutes, lying there in the field after he was ejected from the Cherokee.

Smelling those hots smells, feeling the trickle at the back of his throat start to gush. Wondering what he'd look like to the first responders, his eyes reflecting those strobes, receding voices speaking in their own private code.

