The Nielsens (part one)

by 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

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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 cheeeese...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 Nielsens! [*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 grey, 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 Nielsens. 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 paramecia. 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 Nielsens 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 we had the Audimeter and 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, Tatoo, 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-cee, 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 Nielsens, 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 Nielsens could compromise the integrity of the data the Audimeter was collecting. Father put it in heroic terms: the Nielsens 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.”

(continued in part 2...)