The Nielsens (part two)

by Michael Larkin

[continued from part one...]

After sweeps, my schoolwork started to slip. I had trouble paying attention in class, and my workbooks and tests came back from the teacher marked in ketchup red ink. I had always been a good student, and this academic decline had my teacher, Miss Renworth, a little worried, even moreso when I told her that I was upset because my brother Mikhail had a nasty, life-threatening eye disease he'd picked up in Russia and that it looked as though there was little that could be done about it. I promised to try harder, and then surprised myself by bursting into tears. I let Miss Renworth hug me for a while, until I remembered all the strong women — Barbara Stanwyck as hardy Mrs. Barkley on *The Big Valley*, Esther Rolle as the strong-willed, widowed mother of three on *Good Times* — and said, “I must be strong. I must not cry. You mustn't call my parents. They have so much to worry about.”

“Oh I won't, Fujiko sweetie. I won't, you brave girl,” Miss Renworth said and cradled me in the empty classroom as I ceremoniously dried my tears.

I thought: Welcome to Fantasy Island.

There were other changes after sweeps. I began staying up later and later as my sleep cycle shifted. We still watched TV, though not as much as during sweeps, and everyone spoke far less, Mikhail almost not at all. We all seemed to sleepwalk through the house, and the progress of each evening was marked by non-vocal noises more than anything else. Auto crashes and xylophones for afternoon cartoons. The front door squeaking closed against the deadbolt and doorjamb as Father returned from work. The hiss and bang of running water and pan clatter as Mother prepared dinner while fake typewriters sounded out the news from Walter Cronkite. Then taps of forks and knives against china, like four bad drummers

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each keeping separate, off-beat times. The kissing shuffle of Mother's slippers down the hallway to my parents' bedroom, excusing herself for the night. Then the two farts: the gaseous squall the La-Z Boy kicked out as Father sat down after dinner and the little euphonious “boop” the TV would gasp as Father shut it down for the night.

There were also the vert hold lines. They began appearing shortly after sweeps, first one scrolling through at a time, then two, until after several weeks the screen was split into four distinct horizontal sections every time the TV was turned on. The lines remained fixed until Father would command Mikhail to correct them, at which point Mikhail would jimmy the vert hold button, spin the antenna, chunk the dial a few times, and get the lines moving again, which was more aggravating than the fixed lines. Father had had enough and called Tom Bradford for help when a Bob Hope Christmas special was turned into a Picasso by the static and broken lines.

“It's the Aww Demeter, Tom. I'm quite sure of it. It's wreaking havoc with our picture. And it's getting worse...What?...I know it is, and I wouldn't bother you during the holidays if it weren't important, but short of sweeps and the first month of the season, the holidays are a pretty key time, wouldn't you say? If we can't watch because of the Aww Demeter, then that will throw the whole ratings system off, won't it?...Oh and gee, where are my manners? Merry Christmas, Tom. I apologize for calling, but I think you need to know right away when you've got faulty equipment, don't you think? I mean, you understand that my TV is completely fritzing here...Huh?...But if it's not that...What?...I'm telling you, every night it's off when we go to bed. It can't be...Well, why did you wait so long to tell me? You have to know that that information isn't right...”

Father recradled the phone. “I can't fucking believe it. They've been registering that goddammed test pattern on our TV every night since sweeps ended. It's been going for a solid month now.”

None of us were very interested in this revelation—what did I care what registered after dark, when I slept in broken fashion, over-tired and under-dreamed?—though I was intrigued by Father's use of the word “fucking.” So was Mother.

“Don't fucking say fucking, Sven,” she said, leaning against a doorway arch.

“E-mer-gen-cee, E-mer-gen-see, evry bawdee to get the fuck from fucking street,” Mikhail said. He was starting to look like Lon Chaney as the black and white Phantom of the Opera, only his eyes were grayer with the faintest opaque hint of cataracts.

“Uff da. What is wrong with you people?” Father said.

“Fuck if we know,” I said, for which I was sent to bed without TV. My impeccable, TV-honed comic timing was slipping.

Though my room was warm and I didn't feel sick, I shivered underneath the blankets, unaccustomed to hearing the silence of my body at that hour of the day. My eyes felt encased in thick sockets, and my face was numb, the consistency of putty. The titles on the bindings of the books on my shelf hurt to look at, as did the phony signatures on the posters of *The Six Million Dollar Man*, Ponch Poncherello from *CHiPs*, and *Speed Racer*. I closed my eyes and shivered through a headache and the depths of silence in my room.

I dreamed of a snake hissing because it was getting soaked at the base of a roaring waterfall along with a small tribe of cicadas that was registering its protest even louder than the waterfall's roar. Then the snake was sucked into the bottom of the waterfall through a vacuum tube and out into the middle of a desert of sand dunes where it seemed to be happy, and yet a strange unease settled as the sand blew over the snake's scales, registering a small, gritty scrape that was barely audible, until I realized that the sand the snake was crossing was me. I woke up to hear the scrape and had the distinct sensation of the snake being on top of me, which sat me up in my bed in the dark, my heart pounding. The scraping hiss was there, but faint, then distinct as if coming closer, then gone again.

I opened my door and looked out. The hissing was gone and replaced by a new sound, a kind of high-pitched whine I imagined might have driven a dog mad. I followed the sound down the hallway and into the living room, where I found the TV on, a rainbow test pattern filling the dark room with an eerie prism of electronic color. The room was empty, but I felt as though I had descended into some sort of basement in my house populated with gangsters and boogie men in the form of department store furniture. The rainbow of the TV threaded into the multicolored nubs of the rug and made the floor seem alive. I raced across the rug as if over hot coals and leapt into the La-Z Boy, curling up there for protection from the moving immobiles on the rug.

Slowly, my shaking stilled, effluvia in the room stopped moving, and I began focusing on the bars of color on the screen. There were no vert hold troubles. The bars ran vertically across the screen without interruption, undivided movements of red and green and blue underscored by a horizontal bar of black into which they all seeped along the bottom. I squinted to merge colors. I turned my head sideways, then righted it and simply stared straight on like Mr. Spock into Pandora's box. I listened to the high scream. Felt my eyes receding deeper and deeper into the thickening, numb skin of my face, the scream fainter and fainter, but never fully silencing. I slept.

Dreamt of nothing.

A suggested skit for *Saturday Night Live*, later in the program, maybe after the second musical number: a Japanese-Swedish daughter sleeping on La-Z Boy positioned in front of test pattern on TV is awakened abruptly when her shuffling Japanese-American mother presses a button, causing the speaker to say “boop” (a very funny noise by its own self). Mother sees daughter spike bolt upright in chair and screams in surprise. Daughter, surprised at her mother's screaming, screams as she has been taught to right back at her mother, until the screams become comic

in their lengthy duration, little girl squeal and womanly squeal seeking in some measure to outdo each other, to stake a higher claim on the right to be frightened, put out, scared out of their nightgowns. Then John Belushi comes in, dressed in character as samurai, says something nonsensical like “Oburry masKAT!!” with eyes bulging and then pauses, panting silently at the now-quieted mother and daughter while the live audience whoops and hollers in appreciative recognition of Belushi's recurring character. Then after comical, speedy hand gestures back and forth between mother and daughter in which nothing intelligible to the audience is said, Belushi gives another nonsensical “be quiet!” shout in faked Japanese and then spins and slices his sword through the TV screen, raging at it, tearing it to shreds of its TV prop balsa wood components, the live audience clapping and screaming happily all the way into the commercial.

“You'll be my good girl,” Mother said. I agreed, though I already was good.

“Every mother and daughter need to share secrets,” Mother said and winked.

I said, “I agree,” and then thought of shampoo.

A fuse blew inside the TV after New Year's, causing everyone on-screen to grow envious and seasick. The screen's color ran in gradations of lime green at the center out to a faint teal green at the edges. Every character near the center of the frame appeared to have spent a lot of time tanning on Vulcan. Those on the periphery looked ill, ready to barf.

“Oh, this just takes it,” Father said, discovering the green for the first time.

Mother shushed him, wanting to hear a stream of innuendoes Paul Lynde was spinning on *Hollywood Squares*. Mother had taken to watching with us beginning January 1, like TV was a New Year's resolution, or like the night time test pattern bandit's

secret was out of the bag, point made, Big Brother served notice, daughter frightened, so succumb succumb succumb.

"Goddammit," Father said at the green screen.

"Shhhh," Mother said again.

"Ufff da."

"Shhhhh, I said 'shhhhhhh'."

"But everything's green."

"Shut up, Daddy," Mikhail said, his voice guttural and Russian. Nobody seemed to notice what he'd said, perhaps because Father was picking up the phone to dial Tom Bradford.

"My TV is absolutely on the fritz and I'm sure it's because of that machine, that monster inside of it," Father yelled at Tom Bradford through the receiver. I couldn't hear any voice coming back, which made me think of Tom as a patient and coldly calm man, one who had aged by years over the mere months it had been since we'd seen him. He really *was* Tom Bradford, and Father was one of his many problem children. "Do you understand that my TV is dying?...Oh, all right. I'll be right here. I'm not going anywhere."

Father hung up, said no one was to use the phone because Tom Bradford was calling back. Father had disturbed him at a bad time.

"Bad time?" Father said. "When is it a good time for 'ol Tom? I think Tom is starting to slip, starting to neglect his duties." Mikhail was changing the channel and came across John Wayne. "Ooooo, John Wayne!" Father said. The tube was airing a greened commercial for John Wayne Week. Movies of John Wayne out west in black and white, then into World War II from air and land, a foray into Vietnam, and finally finishing with *True Grit*, a vision of the Duke returned to the West, this time in color, though for us only in green.

"Duke," Mikhail giggled. "Dookie. Duke Duke Duke Duke Duke."

"Oh, I don't like him. I don't like him at all," Mother said, not moving from her seat. John Wayne, as Rooster Cogburn, was

grinning at her, or more accurately, at something over her shoulder in the imaginative distance that we and his gaze shared.

“Don't like him?” Father cried from his post alongside the phone, leaning against the phony wood paneling on the wall onto which the phone was grafted. He had his hand over the receiver, stroking it. “How can you not like the Duke?”

“Dookie,” Mikhail said. His face was lit in green, like a small museum lamp was positioned somewhere under his bangs to give all viewers a vision of the movie monster his face had become. His hand held onto one of the rabbit's ears, slowing the vert hold problem and rendering John Wayne more visible.

“Have you even given him a look-see? A real look?” Father asked Mother.

“All right, all right, mind your blood pressure. I'll give him a try,” Mother said

“Take ‘em to Missouri!” John Wayne hollered from horseback in a black and white clip in which Walter Brennan looked on approvingly.

“And kill ‘em all along the way,” Mother said, a slight grin on her face.

“Dookie kill. Duke Duke Duke,” Mikhail said.

The phone barely had time to form the physical movements required to ring before Father yanked the receiver from its perch.

“What's the word, Tom? Oh...uh huh...uh huh...I don't understand...OK...well listen, I'm sure it's nothing. She's never had problems before...listen, I'm expecting an important call so I'm afraid I'm going to have to end things here...thanks much, mmmmmmmm, bye.” Father pressed the plunger abruptly to end the call, then released it and said, “Tom? Tom?” and apparently hearing nothing but dial tone, replaced the receiver. “Damn.”

Father watched John Wayne clips until the commercials started running. First up was a rehash of the holiday commercial in which thousands of diverse people express their desire to buy the

world a Coke. Christmas was over, but there was still time for some carbonated capitalist good cheer.

"Fujiko," Father said. "Have you been having trouble in school? That was your teacher."

"No worries. Everything is cool," I said, feeling completely unconcerned about Miss Renworth's calling, though she had violated her promise not to do so.

"Long as you're sure."

"No worries."

Father took to stroking the receiver again, yanked it up, said, "Hello? Hello?" and then recradled it.

"This commercial is quite sweet, really," Mother said, looking misty-eyed at the TV world singing in perfect harmony, everyone sugar buzzed on corn syrup, caffeine, and opium. "Don't change the channel, Mikhail, I want them to know we like this one."

Father tried to raise Tom Bradford several times that week to no avail. We took part in John Wayne week, watching every minute of John Wayne's settling of the west, his shooting down of Jap Zeros, his shooting from both hips while atop a horse at full gallop. In *The Green Berets*, we even saw him work with Mr. Sulu to try and convince the Vietcong to fight like it was World War II all over again. We all watched. Mother bought real TV dinners, took over the La-Z Boy, showed us how to eat our meals in foil like astronauts. Father stood vigil against the wall, answered every phone call, always disappointed. Mikhail worked fiercely to keep the picture intact, delined, and destaticized, never saying a word, slouching his way around the TV, his skin aglow with a kind of received luminescence like the hash marks on an electric clock that stay lit at night.

Then Tom Bradford called. We all knew it was Tom Bradford, had a vested interest in what he had to say about fixing our damned TV. Father only said a few words, mostly listened, receiving in shocked silence whatever Tom Bradford had to say.

When he hung up, he looked like he might cry. The dial tone bounced off Father's ear and circled around the kitchen a few times.

"You know what that bastard said? He said we were too 'unusual' of a family. He said he wanted a more 'usual' family. What the hell does that mean?" Father said.

"What are you saying?" Mother said.

"He called me 'Sir.' Never once called me Sven."

"And what about the TV?"

"They have regular turnover. Statistical procedures had to be followed. Said we'd been 'adequately compensated.' That's horse feathers. We've received enough money to go out to maybe one meal as a family."

"Sven."

"The Nielsens don't want us. They're coming tomorrow to take out the Aww Demeter."

Mikhail looked up from the TV. His face was something horrible to behold; my brother had become Quasimodo. He started turning the dial absently with meaty thunks.

"Cut it out, Mikhail," I said. Mikhail kept right on thunk thunk thunking.

"The Nielsens don't want us," Father repeated. "Who in this Godforsaken country is better than we are?" His voice dropped to a near whisper amidst the din coming from the TV set. Mikhail seemed to have turned up the sound. "Who's been more loyal than we have?"

"Oh, Sven," Mother said exactly as someone on *General Hospital* might have, though she remained seated in the La-Z Boy, her neck craning backwards to look at Father.

The static on an in-between channel hissed, then Gene Rayburn on *Match Game* said "...because he fell on his blank," then static hiss. I scooted over towards Mikhail and at first gently moved to lift his hand off the dial, only to find that his fingers were snaked over it as if grafted. I tugged harder, telling him to stop, but he was a strong six-year-old, gripping the dial, not changing channels anymore but holding fast to the static he'd found on Channel 13 of

the UHF dial. Soon I was pulling at his wrist, working at tugging tendons loose, feeling my anger rise, wanting to impale his little hand on the antenna the way one of the *Green Berets* had spiked a North Vietnamese on the branch of a dead Hollywood soundstage tree. Mikhail turned and looked at me, his good eye squinting, his right eye wide and filmy.

"Get away from me you Jap bastard!" he said.

I let go of his hand and fell back, astonished, breathless, as if pushed from a plane without a parachute. I didn't look at my parents, but I could hear them breathing.

"Apologize to your sister!" Mother said.

"Nyet," Mikhail said, still looking at me.

"Right now!"

"Nyet. Nope. No way, pardner."

"Sven!"

Father breathed. "They're coming tomorrow to get the Aww Demeter."

Father took the day off from work at the steel mill (that's not really what he did for a living, but STV doesn't care to show the reality) so he could be present when the technician came to call. I slept in that school day, nobody coming in to tell me to do differently, and I wasn't surprised when I heard the doorbell ring at about ten o'clock and walked out into the front hallway to find that Mikhail was there in his pajamas too, also having slept in or played sick or whatever it was we thought we were doing.

We four stood in the hall, and Father opened the door on Bruce the technician, who'd installed the Audimeter some seven months prior. He possessed the same stoicism I remembered from his first visit, but he had to work hard to keep from looking startled to see all four of us hovering like ghosts in his path. He worked the insides of his mouth under a handlebar mustache.

"Come to take the black bawx, an'at," Bruce the technician said, clipping the bill of his Pirates cap in a salute.

Father, holding the door open, stood to one side and said nothing as he let Bruce pass through. Bruce nodded awkwardly towards Mother, took Mikhail and me in with a few furtive glances, and then made for the TV in the family room beyond. He worked quickly, dropping his tools a few times as we stood watching him just as we had done when he installed it, only now there was no Tom Bradford to break the silence and Father wasn't interested in peering over Bruce's shoulder. It wasn't long before Bruce had the Audimeter extracted and resting atop the TV like some alien being. It looked as though it hadn't collected any dust, let alone data. It just sat atop the halved TV, rectangular and black, daring anyone to assign it significance.

"May I?" Mother asked, her hand resting on the box as Bruce wrestled to quickly replace the back of the TV.

"Be my guest," Bruce said, and as Mother picked up the box, added, "Heavier than yinz think, id'nit?"

"Wouldn't you say that this belongs to us?" Mother asked him, holding the box in front of her with both hands. Father stood to one side looking sick to his stomach like the teal characters at the fringes of our TV.

"Well, nawt really," Bruce said, glancing up from his work.

"But it *was* in our TV. We owned it and used it for all these months," Mother suggested.

"I'm nawt gonna get all legal an'at. I've got no argument with yinz folk."

Mother turned towards Mikhail and nodded, sending Mikhail scurrying out of the family room. Mother looked at Father and began walking in the direction that Mikhail had disappeared, back towards the front door. Father followed, and then so did I. Bruce took no note of our departure.

In the front hallway, Mikhail was waiting with his junior aluminum baseball bat, 26 inches long, 22 ounces heavy. He wheeled it once expertly. "Baseball been berry berry good to me," he said. Mother, Father, and Mikhail walked single file out the door and into the cold morning, and the spikes of wind trailing in their

wake shot up my nightgown and drew goose bumps. I shivered after them and watched as my Mother, as if in some kind of prearranged gesture, extended her arms out before her, dropped the Audimeter into the light dust of snow that had layered our abbreviated front lawn, and then gestured to Mikhail to hand her the bat. Mikhail did so, and Mother gripped it at its center and then handed it to my Father as one might pass over an honored sword. Father took it solemnly and then, without pausing, as if he was afraid to lose his resolve, he hurtled it through the air with the awkward coordination of someone who hadn't swung a bat since boyhood, and brought it down hard onto the Audimeter. Just once, but a satisfying crack ripped the air. He gave the bat to Mother, who stepped back a pace to get the proper spacing and then took to coming down on the box as if chopping wood or killing a near-dead animal. She hacked at it six, seven, eight times, wanting it to be buried underground through the force of her blows, before giving Mikhail back his bat. I watched Mikhail whack at the box's sides, sending it heavily lumping around the lawn a few inches at a time, the box wheezing each time with new breakages, hidden bolts moaning inside the hard casing. The sound of the metal's squeaks and quivers made me feel ill.

"Want a few whacks, darling?" Father said to me, smiling sadly, then dropped the smile as he looked past me towards the door, where Bruce had emerged, his job now finished only to find a small six-year old with a rugby player's build thrashing his charge and its carefully collected data around the snow-patterned lawn. Bruce's stoicism had returned. He watched Mikhail playing with the square, decrepit metal polo ball, whacking it with his junior model mallet and shook his head once.

"I've seen it all now," Bruce said. "Yinzers is fucked up." He left us without further ado, climbing slowly into his rig and driving away.

As the technician drove away, Mother began singing.

"I'd like to teach the world to sing…in perfect har-mo-ny." She "Doo doo dooed" some more of the lyrics that she couldn't remember.

At the appropriate pause in the song, Father sang a “Coca Cola!” then after Mother had “Doo doo dooed” for a while, he did it once more.

Father put his arm about Mother's shoulders, she put hers around the small of his back, and they turned to go inside. Father reached down and gave her bottom a squeeze, and Mother giggled, “Please don't squeeze the Charmin,” as they passed indoors.

Mikhail had given up on decapitating the Audimeter after first Bruce and then my parents stopped watching him. He too watched our Father groping our Mother's ass, and then turned to me, his right eye still wide open against the cold. He ran at me and wrapped me in a bear hug, the first time he had ever done such a thing.

“I love you like no man has ever loved a woman,” he said, in an unfamiliar, melodramatic voice. He squeezed me tighter, his monster face buried in my chest. “Oh darling, never let us part. What shall we ever do? What shall we ever do? Boo hoo. Boo hoo.”

He let me go, and ran towards the front door of our house, giggling. Then he stopped abruptly, turned to face me, said, “You dirty rat!” and then made the sound of a machine gun as he shivered his body backwards, riddled with imaginary bullets. He wove expertly, as a stunt man would have, then fell to his knees before slumping forward, face down in the snow. He lay there for a few beats, leaving me bewildered and staring down at him, then he stood up, robot-like, and went inside the house with snowflakes clinging to his pajamas.

I turned away from my family and looked at our narrow street, wondering who might have seen this episode. The street was empty of people, lined on both sides with dottings of parked cars, most residents at school or at work or inside where they belonged on a cold January morning. Across the street, I noticed for the first time where our neighbors, the Schwartzes, had steamcleaned the front of their stone house, layers of mill soot having been stripped away to reveal the underlying grey slate. Trees up and down the street were naked, one indistinguishable from the next, forming a

kind of soft palate the further away they were from my view. Between their empty limbs, the sky was blue-black. A small muddy mass lay crushed in the street: A bird? A pile of rock salt? A faint stink rose in the air and it took me a moment to remember what ripe gingko smelled like. Mikhail's thrashing about the lawn had brushed aside swaths of snow, both revealing and cracking open fallen stink fruit that the trees had surrendered before Thanksgiving, but which had lain forgotten in their floral mating. The yellow berries and the corresponding yellow fan leaves of the gingko tree lay exposed in the gaps of snow, now so much hibernated mulch for the lawn, a stink of remembrance.

"Fujiko," Mother called dreamily as though things like this happened everyday, "Come inside before you catch cold. Soup's on!"

The smell of the gingko gagged me. I saw my street and our mailbox and our driveway and the cracks in the sidewalk and the rusted tricycle in front of the Schwartz's sandblasted home and none of it looked familiar to me anymore.