

Earworm

by Neil Serven

At some point during the presentation Mitchell had pulled out the phrase, “Different strokes for different folks.” Talking about the new company’s new smartphone app, how you could adjust the settings or some shit. That was around eleven o’clock this morning. And it’s been since then that Paul has been bumping around the office with the theme song from *Diff’rent Strokes* bopping around his brain like a fly against the porch screen in summer.

His memory of the show fills in as the day passes. He reads up on Wikipedia. That was the show with all the Very Special Episodes. He remembers the epilepsy one, the bulimia one. Nancy Reagan showed up at their door to fight the War on Drugs. The guy from *WKRP in Cincinnati* was a child molester (as everyone already knew). Two of the kid actors already dead. That family went through housekeepers like paper towels.

When a man is born, he’s a man of means. Then along come two, they got nothing but the genes.

Genes? Makes no sense, those boys were adopted. Google says it’s *nothing but their jeans*, which is just as ridiculous.

A lot of suspension of disbelief going on there. In real life, in the eighties, those city boys with their basketball wouldn’t have made it past the doorman. Then Dixie Carter showed up and we had to give a shit about her little cornbread twerp of a son, only because Willis was like 30 by then. She’s dead now, too.

Turns out old Mr. Drummond is still kicking around though, outliving us all in his penthouse apartment with his gold reserves and some contemporary Señora Garrett there to wipe his ass and leave pills on his dinner tray.

A couple weeks ago someone had said, “We’ll have to take it one day at a time.” Was that Cecilia calling the office? That was it: their little girl had a fever, they’d wait and see how she felt the next morning. Sure enough the lyrics came around, then the premise. A

mother and two daughters. Divorced. Where the fuck did they live, Omaha? Des Moines? Pick any flat Midwestern city since they never left the apartment anyway. Mackenzie Phillips: another screw-up.

And while you're here, enjoy the view. Keep on doin' what you do. Hold on tight, we'll muddle through.

The super in his denim vest and jangly tool belt letting himself in *very quietly* with his master key and the women just looking over their shoulders, yeah, you want something? Kind of a precursor to Kramer from *Seinfeld*, in that way, except you expected him at some point to twist his little mustache and rape Valerie Bertinelli on the couch with a flashlight. Otherwise, what was the point of the key.

How is it that Paul could remember whole episode arcs from a show like *Family Ties* (Elyse going into labor while singing on public television) and it never sunk in that they were going to Cecilia's niece's christening on Sunday? Why was it that, when Cecilia expressed annoyance at his shortsightedness with one of her down-home mild oaths ("Criminy sakes alive, the hell's got into you?"), one of those Arkansas habits of hers he fell in love with because it sort of reminded him of Kristy McNichol, the first thing that popped into his head was a jingle to a car commercial he hadn't seen in almost thirty years? He even knew the source: it was on a VHS tape of *The Bad News Bears* recorded off Providence's WPRI Channel 12 sometime in 1981 (snowy but still watchable, with swears and racial epithets cleaned out for TV) and kept in his family's collection for years until the thing plum wore out. He remembers watching it with his brother Wayne in their family's den all the time while the two of them drank apple juice out of Burger King glasses and played Stratego on the shag rug. Sometimes they would forget to fast-forward.

Sakes alive! Sakes alive! Only Mazda's got a new sporty truck for just fifty-seven ninety-five!

Sort of in a gospel style, the kind you wave your hands to all oh-lord, the impossibly deep bass voice coming in with that one last "sakes alive" at the end. The numbers in the price were painted on a garage door that came down. Back when pickup trucks were little,

weren't out to crush every other car on the road. Wayne always said he wanted a truck like that when he was older, but then they stopped making them.

The next one came at church, during the service for the christening. He heard a greeting ("Heya, Georgie!") from the pew behind them and so of course: "Georgy Girl." From their mother's old record collection. Cecilia made him watch the movie when they were dating.

It scraped at Paul's brain like a cat's claw at the door. He hadn't heard the song in years. Was that the Searchers? The Seekers? Ma would play her old sixties records on the hi-fi when she cleaned the house, or paid bills at the dining room table.

He tried to shoo it away. He must have made a face; next to him Cecilia, bouncing Lois on her lap, furled her brow and mouthed, you okay there? He had actually meant to pay attention to Father Mark, whose sermons could be really funny if you listened through to the end, but the thread was lost somewhere around the window shopping but never stopping to buy.

They rose to sing hymns. "Rock of Ages" did nothing to scratch the itch, and neither did "Morning Has Broken," though that one did cut into the signal a little bit; it appeared on the one Cat Stevens record Paul owned, issued long before the guy found Allah and got himself kicked off planes. "Amazing Grace" didn't stand a chance.

"Piano Man" was just annoying. Really, Billy, you've got some nerve to show up here. At least this one Paul could trace back: it sort of had that same loop-de-loop piano bit as "Morning Has Broken," which only meant a second leak had sprung.

After church, they enjoyed refreshments on the patio at Cecilia's sister's house. June and her husband, Michael, lived up in the Mulberry Hill area of town, a neighborhood of spaced-apart homes and swimming pools and stand-alone basketball hoops facing the street. The menu was kept simple: crabmeat sandwiches, potato salad, iced tea. The air was nice: there was a breeze rustling

through the trees that rose up over the neighbor's yard. Blackbirds chattered as it picked up.

He remembered that if he were to walk down the path in the woods behind June and Michael's house he would come across a wading stream that bubbled where it went over the rocks. Nature getting by on its own rhythm. He thought about taking Lois down there later.

A car came up the hill. Beneath his shoes Paul could feel the thumping of bass beats gradually getting louder. He saw the tea in his glass ripple.

Back to reality, there goes gravity, there goes a man's sanity.

The engine cut out. Those were the worst kind, your brain always wanted to pick up where they left off. "That's Ricky," June explained. The neighbor's teenage son. "You can imagine how much fun we have trying to put Addie down for a nap in the summertime."

They drove home late in the afternoon, the car windows cracked open. They left the radio off because they wanted Lois to sleep, and Cecilia decided to nap, too. With nothing to think about but the road in front of him, Paul could only spin the dial in his head, overlapping frequencies: back to reality, blackbird has spoken, shed those dowdy feathers and fly. He relaxed his grip on the wheel and tried to focus on the sounds inside the car. There was the tinkle of his key ring dangling from the ignition. The uneven breathing of his wife next to him, his daughter behind him. The whip of the wind, the whirr of the wheels on the road.

