

Jill Dearman

THE MIDGE MARGOLIES SHOW

HE KNEW HE SHOULD KEEP WRITING and avoid the temptation to turn on the radio at that moment, but his urge was too great. Kaufman was an enormous man, filled with enormous needs that could never be filled; he knew these things about himself. And so it was, with this knowledge, that he got up from behind the precarious yellowing card table he called a desk, walked to the westernmost tip of his studio apartment on East 29th Street and turned on the radio.

It was the most unlovable radio you could imagine: a tired body of dull black that had lost its sheen, a utilitarian rectangle that at one time might have wanted to be a boombox but when it came right down to it just didn't have the nerve. There was nothing inspiring about this radio, with its bent silver antennae that could fall and break like an elderly limb at any time, but Kaufman was lonely and longed to hear other voices besides the ones in his head.

He turned the on/off knob to the right and heard the static-drenched voice of Midge Margolies, host of "Where Are You Calling From?" a chat show Kaufman had stumbled upon during one of the long nights spent alone after his wife kicked him out.

"Tonight," Midge crooned in her aging, honeyed voice, "We have a special treat for you would-be scribes of all stripes. A couple of fellows I've befriended over the years, great Literary Lions who have passed over to the Other Side are here with me to help you, and only you, dear caller out there in radio land, to write your Great American Novel, your heartbreaker of a story, your only evidence that you lived on this planet of ours, that you felt, that you loved, that you were able to type it all up and get it to an agent who then says to you, 'Sorry kid, the publishing world ain't what it used to be. Better luck next time. Have you thought about working in radio?' Oh sorry, I didn't mean to insert my own hard luck story into the mix like that, darlings.

"Anyway, patient listeners, my dear fans, fellow lonely-hearts and storytellers, the lines are open and so are my arms. I've got two terribly handsome men here, John and Ray, the former was the

latter's teacher and the latter learned a lot. We've got an open bottle of Seagram's Seven Rye Whisky, a bucket of ice, three tough and tender tumblers and we're ready for your calls. Working on a story and don't know where to go with it? Call 1-800-555-WBLU, the place to call when you're blue, when you don't know what to do or whom to do it with. I'm Midge Margolies and I'm here for you all night. We'll take a quick break and then be back on the air, and on the fly with John and Ray. Don't go away."

Kaufman wondered if it was a sign. He'd been suffering over this story for weeks. He'd gotten to a place that felt like the halfway mark, how he knew he'd reached that spot he couldn't say, but like a swimmer in the sea he could sense the latitude and longitude in his body, on his wet skin. He knew he had to go forward but he prayed for a sign to tell him to go back. Kaufman on this Indian summer night in New York City was Dante in the Dark Wood, he was every man who'd reached the middle of his days and knew that the ones that lay ahead would be a pallbearer's march to the grave. Sure there'd be pretty flowers to sniff along the way, but the reality of his destination made those lilacs and posies smell awfully sad.

Before he could think too much he placed his finger inside the hole of the rotary phone, spun it round and then spun again, and again and again ... until, to his great surprise, a live voice answered.

"You've reached the Midge Margolies show. Skipper Dunn speaking. You have questions for the guests?"

Kaufman recognized the young, fey voice of Skipper who sometimes played the role of Midge's second banana. He fielded her calls, dried her tears and some said that at the end of the day they each made hay with the same no good man. But you can't believe what you read in the tabloids, can you?

"Uh, yeah. My name's Kaufman. I'm a writer calling from New York City and ..."

"Fine. Please hold and turn down the volume on your radio. You're next in the queue."

"Whoa. Wait. Don't you have to screen me ... ask me some questions?"

"You're a writer named Kaufman. You're in New York City. You clearly have problems with your writing..."

"How do you know?"

"You're calling a radio show instead of typing up your story, aren't you? Now hold on. Help is on the way."

With that, Kaufman heard a click and the sound of muzak. He cradled the phone in the crook of his neck and reached under his sink for his rough draft which sat in his “filing cabinet,” right next to the spaghetti pot and colander. It was eleven pages and seemed so inconsequential, so flimsy. The pages were stained with eggy splotches of pasta water. He’d been working on this story for too long. He didn’t know what it was about anymore; he just loved the ending.

“Kaufman in New York City, this is Midge. You’re on the air. Tell us your story, and Where You’re Calling From ... spiritually speaking, darling.”

“Well, I’m working on this story. It doesn’t have a title yet...”

“That’s your problem, bud. This is Ray talking. My first wife told me I had trouble with commitment. I didn’t pay much attention. I was young and I’d married her. What more commitment did she want? But when the divorce was final and when I tried to write, I found myself sitting in front of a set of pages, wondering, ‘What am I going to call this mess?’ Nothing came to me, so I let it be. Those pages sat on my desk for months. Then one day I called her to tell her she was right. But her old man answered, so I decided to let it go. ‘Just let me talk to my kids,’ I said, like he was doing me some favor. He hung up on me cause I was drunk. That was the favor he did me. He wasn’t such a bad guy. He knew how to commit.”

“Mr. Kaufman, this is John. Forgive my protégé. He’s sitting here with a bottle of rye, and too many memories. Let’s stick to the work at hand. The first line says it all, my boy. It’s a statement of what’s to come and why, so let’s hear it.”

Kaufman could hear the clink of ice as John cleared his throat and awaited those first words.

“Okay, here goes: ‘Kaufman was on his way to therapy when he suddenly felt an overpowering thirst for milk.’”

“Oooh ... very Freudian,” Midge said. “Sorry boys. I know I’m just the hostess but this cupcake really wonders about darling Kaufman’s taste for milk.”

“Well, I must pipe in for a moment, dear Midge merely to give Mr. Kaufman a bit of advice from a genteel old scribe. Mr. Kaufman, I humbly suggest you think a bit more about the words ‘overpowering’ and ‘suddenly.’ They’re a little broad ...”

“I was a little broad once too. But it’s the crumpets, boys.

The crumpets! They're not kind to a woman's hips over the years. Ray, any thoughts?"

"I like a woman with a little something to grab on to, Midge. The lady I was with after my first wife, she had curves in all the right places, and maybe a few more than she needed too. She was a waitress in a diner near a country club where I cleaned the pool, tended the grounds. One day, I fished a bottle of diet pills out of the bottom of the water. I went to her hash house for lunch, just to sit at the counter and watch her bend forward to pour a cup of coffee. I showed her the pills and she thought I was trying to tell her something, like I thought there was too much of her. But it wasn't like that. I liked her just fine, she felt good under my hands, under my chest. A few weeks later she got back together with her ex-husband. I never saw her again."

"Ray, dear chap," John said. "That's an utterly fascinating little vignette, a deliriously scintillating slice-of-life, but can we stay on point here?"

"Boys, don't quarrel," Midge piped in. "Speak, Kaufman, speak. What say you? And don't forget my question: where are you calling from? Cosmically speaking."

"Wait a second, Johnny. Don't get all prim and proper on the guy...telling him not to use this word or that. Maybe he's a big man, who needs to use big words...words of size, of heft."

"How did you know I'm a big guy?"

"The dead see all, Kaufman," John reminded him.

"Well, let me read you the whole graf if that's okay. Maybe you can see where I'm going..."

"Fair enough, boys?"

Kaufman heard the manly grunt of Ray and the spiffy "yes indeedy" of John, and with a sense of confidence he rarely felt when speaking to the living he said:

"Here goes: ' Kaufman was on his way to therapy when he suddenly felt an overpowering thirst for milk. He literally had to run into the nearby Korean Deli (strangely named Michelle's) on University Place and buy a quart. He turned onto 10th Street, and noted the passersby like a criminal. He had to wait until they were gone before he could attack his prey. There were no hidden doorways on this street, so he simply faced the brick wall, opened the cardboard container and sucked down its contents like a drunk on one last bender."

“You really are a sick bastard, Kaufman. Sorry, Midge. Will they bleep that out? Anyway, keep going, will ya?”

“No, do not keep going. Mr. Kaufman,” John insisted. “I urge you to cut the parenthetical about the name of the deli. It’s self-conscious and takes us out of the flow, reminds us that we are reading a piece of fiction. Besides, it’s just plain sloppy.”

“How did you know there were parentheses?”

“The dead see all, darling. Weren’t you listening? Do continue. I sense this is a man who lusts for women, for maternal women like yours truly, women who give away the milk for free, like me, because that’s the only way we know how to love.”

“All right, Midge.”

“Wait a second. Skipper, drinks all around,” John said. “Ray doesn’t want his old teacher to act prim and proper like a dowdy school marm. Fine! Let’s drink like men — and that means you too Midge, and you too, Skipper. And Mr. Kaufman join us as well. And then let’s hear the whole story.”

“It’s just a draft.”

“Just a draft. Jesus man,” Ray rumbled. “You’ve got to show some balls. Commit! Commit!”

“Get off his back, Ray,” Midge demanded. “You can be such a brute. That’s why it never could’ve worked between us. Although God, you smell good, like a real outdoorsman. But that doesn’t matter. You’re still a lout, an ape of a man.”

The bickering continued as Kaufman pulled a bottle of Beck’s beer from his refrigerator, and Skipper spread the Seagram’s around the control room: neat for Ray, rocks for John and soda for Midge. For himself, Skipper poured a glass of milk; he was starting to feel for this guy Kaufman.

“All right, my boy,” John commanded. “Let’s hear the rest. Go, chap, go!”

The milk tasted so good. It was vanilla-flavored and sweet like a woman’s belly. When was the last time he’d even drank a glass of milk? He had developed some mild but persistent allergies and rashes over the past few years, since turning forty, and by process of elimination had figured out that dairy was no friend of his. Never one to cut anything out completely, he still indulged his taste for aged blue cheese every couple of months, at some cocktail party or another. And in the very cold weather he might order a steaming hot

cappuccino. Otherwise it was ham without Swiss and coffee black instead of regular.

He drank half the quart without blinking then paused, out of breath. He felt overwhelmed by his lust for life and bodily satisfaction yet simultaneously empty and without a soul. He was like a man torn between banging a whore and slitting his jugular. He looked up at the night sky. The moon was full. This was the shortest night of the year and it felt like the coldest one too. He sloshed down the rest of the milk and ditched the carton and brown bag on the street, amidst some boxes of random trash.

Lying on the couch on East 10th Street, Kaufman felt the urge to confess it all, because he knew his confession meant nothing.

“It was so strangely clichéd. This desire for milk. Mother’s milk. I was craving it so passionately. You have no idea.”

“What were you craving?” The voice of Joel—his shrink—asked, from behind his head.

“You mean what was I really craving?”

“As you wish.”

“As I wish? As I wish. As I wish I wouldn’t have to deal with my mother at all. But that’s not what I’m really thinking about right now.”

“Then what?”

“I’ve been thinking that my wife may be sleeping with another man.”

But really he was not thinking about that at all—not at that moment at least. What he was thinking about he felt too ashamed to share, with his shrink, his rabbi, with anyone. Kaufman remembered his mother coming into his room when he was eight years old, going into his closet and pulling out his old clothes.

“What are you doing?!” he screamed as she slung a pair of the overalls he’d outgrown across her arm.

“I’m giving these to your brother. They’re just your hand-me-downs.”

“They’re mine!” young Kaufman yelled.

“Calm down,” his mother said, trying to reason with him. “He’s the little boy now. You’re the big boy. These are little-boy clothes. You don’t want to keep these now, do you?”

“Yes! They’re mine!”

“Well that’s too bad,” his mother said, suddenly turning on him. “You’re his older brother and you have to learn the meaning of

the word sacrifice.”

He cried so much she finally relented and left him the clothes. But still she mocked him about it in front of her friends for weeks after the incident, as though this would toughen him up, make him more of a man.

Years later when his brother died from a drug overdose he would pull out those old oshkosh b’gosh overalls and cry into them, allowing the metal buckle to leave an imprint on his forehead. He felt terribly guilty for not giving something to his baby brother when he had the chance. Yet, at the same time he felt terribly happy that he’d kept almost everything from childhood so that he could hold that time in his life close to him forever.

Later that night, after he and Johanna had eaten a nutritious and tasty dinner of salmon and sauteed dandelion greens, Kaufman took her in his arms and danced her around their living room. “I’m koo-koo for you-ouu,” he cooed as he nestled his face into her neck.

“You’re silly...”

Then he smelled it. The scent of mountain air and gravel terrain. It smelled manly and strong and it emanated from her neck like the earthy scent of another man’s hands and mouth. Was she having an affair? He was afraid to ask and didn’t want to know.

“You’re somewhere far away,” Johanna said to him, as she ran her hands over his back.

“I’m right here. But I want to be somewhere far away with you.”

“Where, honey?”

“The country. The mountains. Let’s buy a jeep and have an adventure together this summer.”

“Yes, honey, let’s,” she said. “Now what would you like for dessert?”

He hated how she patronized him. But he loved how she seamlessly stamped out all his highs and lows with one innocuous comment. She was like a pretty nurse in a psych ward, handing him his meds in a cardboard cup. Bottoms up and goodbye to all worries; goodbye to all emotions.

A week later he was back on the couch, telling Joel about his suspicions.

“But even if she is with another man from time to time, she’ll be with me on New Year’s Eve.”

“Isn’t it for everyone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t play dumb, Joel. Honestly, I should let Johanna go off with her lover on New Year’s Eve. That should be my gift to her, after watching her gracefully suffer through three days with my mother during Chanukah. That woman has subtle ways of torturing my wife...”

“And you.”

“Yes. But by all accounts I’m her favorite son. The only son she has left. Her sweet boy. My wife is merely her competition. Johanna’s beautiful, and a wonderful cook and great with kids -- all the nieces and nephews I mean -- and she’s a whip-smart attorney. But all of this goes unrecognized by my mother.”

“Well, at least you recognize how wonderful Johanna is.”

“Yes. And maybe I’m not the only one who does. Is our time up now?”

“What’s your hurry?” Joel asked. “Got a date?”

He hated it when his shrink made lame jokes. It made him feel superior to Joel when he would’ve preferred a shrink he could look up to, ideally someone manly, confident and all-knowing—like Johanna’s lover.

But the truth was, Kaufman did have a date. He walked out of Joel’s 10th Street office and rounded the corner at 9th Street and 5th Avenue. The close proximity of the shrinks’ offices made the whole situation logistically convenient for Kaufman. Of course he had to be careful of being caught by one who might see him entering the office of the other.

“Come in,” Francine said.

He almost forgot to take his wedding ring off, but managed to do so as he walked past her toward the couch. For Francine he was a bachelor. Kaufman laid down, removed his wire-framed spectacles and placed them on his chest. He folded his hands together over his widening paunch.

“So,” Kaufman began. “She’s driving me mad. I know it sounds dramatic, but it’s true. I met her at the train station again. I told her that my feelings for her were beginning to blossom. A strange word to use, don’t you think?”

“It’s poetic,” Francine said. He could hear her pencil scratching on paper, behind his head.

“Poetic, yes. Being with Geneviève is like poetry. It’s like

being a word inside the opening line of a beautiful couplet. I'm so lonely without her. I go home and I'm all by myself and I long to see her. But I have to wait for her calls. She doesn't want her husband to know about me. Yet, she tells me she adores me. Not often. But she did say it twice. Last night I bought her a Tanqueray and tonic at the Railroad Bar. I drank a boilermaker. I was hoping she'd let me kiss her, but when I moved in for the kill she seemed a little shy. We held hands like high school kids as the calls of 'all aboard' grew more and more urgent. I want her to be my wife. But she has a husband already. Francine, I don't know what to do. I want her to be all mine. I can't share a single drop of her with another man."

"Seems like you have to make a decision."

The next day, Geneviève called Kaufman at work. When he heard her voice, he shooed Arthur, his assistant out of his office. The kid could give him a sales pitch later.

"You're not going to believe this, honey-bunny," she whispered.

He felt drugged and delirious when she called him pet names like that. "He's going out of town. He's going to be away on New Year's Eve. Have you ever heard of such a thing? What kind a marriage is this? Do you love me, honey-bunny? Do you love your Sweet Angel?"

He wasn't drugged enough to play that hand yet.

"Oh my poor Sweet Angel. How could he leave beautiful you all alone on the last night of the year?"

"The last night of the year and the most important night of the year for any couple. Well, I don't want to be alone on that night. I certainly do not. And why should I? I decided two years ago that I wanted to be married, and within two months of making that decision I was engaged. So if he's going to treat me like this I can find another husband just as quickly and easily, can't I, honey-bunny? A better hubby. "

This was obviously his opening. He could ask her to be with him. But what about Johanna? And there were other factors. Family obligations. Money. It was impossible. He was getting his wish—a chance to ditch his real life and live his dream, but at what price?

"Geneviève, baby. Arthur's in the middle of a crisis. He doesn't know how to handle this Granger account and I fear he's going to lose us a mint if I don't step in. Now, I don't want you to worry about a thing,

you hear me? I'll take care of everything. Let me call you in a little while, okay angel?"

"All right," she said, tentatively.

He felt as if he had a little power now and he didn't like it. It was like a hot potato he wanted to toss to the next guy. Kaufman preferred it when she didn't let him get away with anything. Now he'd have to plot his own capture or escape. But which one did he really want?

Soon, during a particularly tedious budget meeting, a plan began to hatch in his brain. By close of business that day he'd arranged it all. He maxed out his MasterCard but he knew it would be worth it.

"Honey," he told Johanna. "To hell with a late supper at Kitchen East. That place has gotten too trendy. We're staying at the Soho Grand on New Year's Eve. It's going to be a beautiful end of the year."

"Oh sweetie," his wife said. "That sounds magnificent. What would you like me to wear for you?"

"I'll pick something out of your closet."

Five minutes later, Kaufman had Geneviève on the horn:

"Soho Grand. Just you and me. There'll be no restraining ourselves then. Your husband left you in my hands, and I'll just have to do with you what I will."

He'd never spoken so boldly to her before. She'd never allowed him to. He never knew what response he might get from Geneviève. He always just held his breath and prayed for the best.

"Oh my wonderful man," she said. "I can't wait to be with you."

The endorphins raced through his blood, lifting his spirits to a heavenly place.

On the morning of New Year's Eve the phone rang at ten past six.

"Yes?" he said.

"Where are you?" his stepfather asked. "Your mother's already checked in. She needs you right now. You better come quickly."

He knew what he had to do.

He took all his souvenirs and mementos of Geneviève and put them in a velvet sack, which he'd gotten with a new pair of loafers at Barney's. There were a few letters, a snapshot he'd asked a

stranger to take of them at Grand Central and a wax heart she'd given him along with an empty box that had once held candy. At the last minute, he wedged himself into the back of his closet and behind an accordion file which contained his last year's tax return and receipts, he pulled out a Keds shoebox. Inside were his childhood overalls. He put them in the sack and headed out.

At Grand Central Station he dropped the sack on track 19. When the 6:55 from Stamford rolled in he thought he could hear its contents being crushed like peanut shells underfoot at a rowdy tavern.

"I can't make it tonight," he told Geneviève. "My mother's in the hospital. I'm on my way there right now. I need to go under the knife along with her, and I pray that saves her."

"My brave man, my handsome hero. You could die. Please. Meet me at the hotel. At our hotel before you go."

"There's no time."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm on a pay phone at Grand Central."

"Sit on the fourth step across from the Information booth. I'm coming."

An hour later she arrived. She looked magnificent. She wore a tight white dress under her black faux fur coat. A devil-may-care bride.

"Come with me, sailor," she said.

They headed toward the restrooms.

"Wait here," she said. "And keep an eye on the door. I'll give you the signal when it's time."

Was she crazy? Maybe. But it was the last night of the year and she was all soft and cool and white like the inside of an ice cream sandwich. After about seven minutes, during which time he clocked eleven rushed female commuters exiting the restroom, he saw her poke her head out. She smiled.

He followed those gleaming teeth right into a stall. He closed the door behind them and gave it to her over the toilet, to prove he was an animal, and not the domesticated kind either. As he climaxed, his life and his wife flashed before his eyes. He saw himself at age five, crying at his own birthday party, when his mother yelled at him for spilling pistachio ice cream on his fancy yellow polo shirt. And in the distance there was his wife, running in to defend and protect him. He saw himself at age ten, cutting school to go to the movies by himself:

fat, lonely and misunderstood. And behind the image of his young self, again stood beautiful Johanna. It was like two photographs that got exposed into each other, coming together to form one ghostly set of two half-images. She looked at his young, tubby body with love. He shuddered a final groan and zipped up.

“Goodbye, Geneviève,” he said.

Kaufman couldn't look at his mistress. He might never leave if he did. He arrived at Columbia Presbyterian at 9:15 a.m.

“We thought you might have gotten cold feet,” the doctor said.

“I agreed to this weeks ago, and I'm here just as I said I would be.”

His mother was dying yet livid.

“Where the hell have you been?”

“Someone had a heart attack on the subway. The train was delayed for what felt like forever. Forgive me.”

“You didn't tell the wife, did you?”

“No. of course not. I keep my promises to you, Mother. She's working today and I booked a room for us for the night. Arthur will pay her a visit and tell her a story. She'll believe him; don't worry.”

“Are you sure you don't mind doing this?” his mother asked him, as if he had only volunteered to drive her downtown.

“It's my pleasure,” he said, with the proper irony. “It's merely a kidney.”

By New Year's Day he was dead and his mother was demanding breakfast.

Kaufman stopped. The story was finished. He could hear that clearly enough, at last. He realized then he wasn't in the middle of his life, he was at the end.

“Quite a last line,” Skipper said to break the ice.

“I've known women like Geneviève,” Ray said. “They break your heart and they don't even know why they're doing it. But you break their hearts right back; that's the joke of it all. Nobody means to hurt anybody, but at the end of the day, we're all dead or dying, right?”

“I'm intrigued by Arthur,” John said. “Was there a hint of homoeroticism there?”

“The wife seems rather two dimensional, darling,” Midge said. “And Kaufman is quite a lying sack of crap isn't he? Kaufman

the character, I mean, of course.”

“Yeah,” Kaufman said. “She deserves better than the little bits of humanity I gave her. She was a good wife to Kaufman. He didn’t even see who she was.”

“Well you must see her, good fellow,” John said. “You must love her the way you probably couldn’t love your real wife. I know. The dead see all.”

“They don’t see everything,” Kaufman said, calling out to Midge with longing. “They don’t see what’s between us, what we had. No one can.”

“You threw it all away,” she said, wanting to cry but knowing the dead shed no tears.

“Is it too late to tell you I love you, that I’m sorry, that I want you back?”

Kaufman realized, as he said those mundane words, that if this were a story, it could all just be a dream. But it wasn’t a story and it wasn’t a dream; this was his life. Believe it if you want to, or don’t. This was his reality. It was what he heard inside his head every moment within every moment of this purgatory, this non-existence of his own creation. Voices. Words. Static.