

KBBO Radio Dreams

BY: WILL MUSGROVE

Joe Smiley spins in his black office chair, scooting toward the switchboard to appease the masses. He drops a needle on a vinyl, playing the latest Elvis Presley song “Hound Dog” for the thousands of loyal KBBO listeners. The station is quiet at this time of night, but he doesn’t mind. The silence that encases the wood-patterned, wallpapered walls during the graveyard DJ shift soothes Joe. He is able to escape the whining of his wife, Beth, and the torment of his mundane life with her. Ever since their son, Josh, left for college three years ago, Joe feels that Beth wants so much from him. She complains about his lack of interest in her, about how distant he has become in their relationship. It isn’t his fault that after thirty-two years of marriage he doesn’t have anything else to say. Not to mention, he is jealous of the life she has lived, a life full of parties, people, and adventures. When the song finishes, he straps on his headphones and rolls his chair over to the microphone in studio.

“We will be right back after these local messages with the latest rock the fifties has to offer. This is KBBO, where the ears are always listening,” Joe says in his smooth radio voice that flows with the viscosity of maple syrup.

He extends his long legs, rubbing his left hand across his wrinkled face. Joe glances down at his watch. In only an hour Pete, the morning DJ, will come and relieve him. Joe cannot believe how fast the days rush by now. The weeks seem to blur together. His life is just a series of motions, a routine that he is forced to act out. He thinks about leaving Beth, starting over somewhere else. But at the age of fifty-six, it’s too late for him to begin anew. He is being stalked, and time is the hunter.

A phone resting on the corner of the switchboard begins ringing. Baarrinng, Baarrinng, Baarrinng. Joe rolls over to the phone and answers it, pressing the receiver to his

right ear. It feels heavy in his hand, so he puts the weight of his head on his left arm.

“KBBO radio, this is Joe.”

“What are you doing?”

“I think you might have the wrong number.”

“I’m worried about you.”

“Who’s this?” Joe says, his voice displaying a tone of concern.

Joe’s question is only met by a dial tone. Hanging up the phone, he is shaken. But at the same time, his body fills with a passing peace. He leans back in his chair and takes in a deep breath, his once flat stomach rounder than a bass drum. Joe sends his mind back to a happier state. He remembers when he and Beth first met.

Sitting in the passenger’s seat of his father’s brown Saxon Roadster, Joe’s leg nervously thumped against the leather interior while he pressed a notebook to his chest. His father, Steve Smiley, gave him a glare of impatience. Around them students dressed in skirts and wool suits rushed into a large brick building that featured a granite sign hanging above the doorway: Alexander Hamilton High School. The school had two wings crafted from cement attached to its sides, and Joe thought it resembled a monster that was stitched together from different body parts. A sprawling field of grass was the perimeter of the building, with a fountain spraying water upwards in the center of the campus.

“You can’t stay in the car forever,” Steve said, his face scrunched together due to an immense grin spreading

across it. "What if they all hate me?" Joe said.

"Hate you? Yeah probably," Steve said, chuckling.

With his eyes welling up, Joe adjusted the red tie dangling from his neck. His father reached over and tousled his short brown hair, and Joe knew he was joking. He wished he was back in San Antonio, where his friends and his old way of life resided. He resented his father for moving him to Los Angeles.

"Of course they will like you, Joe. What's not to like?"

"I wish we never moved."

"I know, I know. But can you please give it a try?"

After opening the car door that shielded him from change, Joe exited the vehicle. He stared at the entrance of the school, examining every detail of it, hoping he could spot some familiarities. The smell of freshly cut grass tickled his nose hairs. His father fired up the Roadster's engine, startling Joe.

"You be good. I got to get to work," Steve said as he squeezed a fedora on his head.

Joe nodded back at his father, and then watched as he drove away. He continued to inspect his surroundings. To his left, a group of burly boys were tossing a baseball. To his right, some girls were giggling and pointing at other people on the campus. He walked toward the entrance, pondering what the hell he was doing here.

When Joe reached the front of the building, a tall, ginger-haired boy knocked his notebook out of his hand. His whole body felt flush as he scurried to retrieve his possession. The bully snatched Joe's notebook off the ground and tossed it to his chubby colleague. Everyone

witnessing the act laughed thunderously, watching as Joe raced back and forth between the two boys, struggling to catch his belonging from the air. All he wanted to do was cry and run, run back to San Antonio. Joe's senses began to shut down in an attempt to defend him from the embarrassment. His vision was going in and out of focus. But from the chaos that surrounded him, a voice in the crowd managed to seep out, a voice that coated his eardrums in sugar.

"Hey, leave him alone," Beth said, pushing her way to the front of the action.

Joe could see more clearly than ever before, staring at his petite, blonde hero. His heart froze when she retrieved the notebook and placed it in his right hand. He peered into her green eyes, and the world that reflected off her irises resembled a classical painting. He was in love.

On his way home from the station, Joe stops at a convenience store to purchase some beer. He has developed a taste for the spirits in the past few months, finding it eased the boredom. Most of the time he gets a six pack of Ballantine Ale, but this morning he decides to double the amount. Carrying the beer to the counter, Joe again ponders about leaving Beth. It would be easy, he thinks: get in his 1952 Ford pickup and drive, drive until he is free. Setting the beer down in front of the cashier, he knows he doesn't have the nerve. Where would he go? What would he do? He pays for the beer and dawdles back to his truck.

Pulling into the driveway of his humble, cookie-cutter house, Joe removes the keys from the ignition. Looking at the dimly lit building, he wonders if Beth is asleep or if she stayed up to greet him when he got home. He hates it when she is awake when he gets back from work. She just wants to talk about his day, her day, their life, for the thousandth time. His stomach knots, and Joe believes he

is making himself sick. He opens the driver's-side door of the truck and jumps out, plucking the beer from the bed before he strolls to his prison.

Reaching the front door, Joe pushes it an inch at a time so not to awaken Beth. He peeks his head in the house when he has room and looks to see if he is alone. With no one in sight, he saunters in and pops a beer in celebration. The house smells of lilies, Beth's favorite flower, and the stench engulfs Joe's body, making him gag. Tiptoeing toward the kitchen in search for some food, a light grasps his attention. Turning, he spots Beth standing near the bedroom hallway. She is wearing a long, white nightgown. Her blond hair is now gray, and her youthful body and face are replaced with ones Joe tries to forget.

"Can you please shut that light off?" Joe says.

Beth flicks the light switch. He prefers it when it's dark and hard to navigate; it makes him feel as if he is somewhere new, somewhere exciting.

"Hey, Joe, how was work?" Her voice carves through his whole body.

"Fine."

"I left some food in the oven for you."

"I'm not hungry. I think I'll go to bed."

Cracking another beer, Joe spreads himself out on couch in the living room. He watches as Beth walks back into the bedroom. Joe remembers when he and Beth bought this house after they got married, how much happier they were. He reminisces about how they spent hours talking about the future.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

An excitable woman in a red jacket escorted Joe and Beth around their soon-to-be home. She was showing them all that the house had to offer, pointing out every detail to sweeten the deal. Joe just shrugged his shoulders when the realtor gestured at the electric refrigerator and the other features that were supposed to make his life easier. He noticed how wide-eyed Beth was as she took the chance to explore every inch of the house. Moving from the black-and-white tiled floors of the kitchen, down the white textured walls of the hallway, to the fifteen-by-fifteen-foot room that was to be their bedroom, Joe could tell Beth desired to spend the remainder of her life in this suburban home.

"What do you think?" Beth said.

"I don't know. It's a lot of money, and it's a lot farther away from the station than our apartment is," Joe said in rebuttal.

"But we can afford it now that you are a disc jockey. Plus, we will need the room soon."

Beth rubbed her stomach, making Joe uneasy. Beads of sweat streamed from the pores on his forehead. Wiping the moisture from his brow, he saw Beth waiting in anticipation.

"Well, sir, the price of this house is actually cheaper than renting an apartment in the end," the realtor said with a fake smile.

He was out numbered. Joe wished to make Beth happy, but he was scared. What if something happened at the station and he couldn't afford the house? What if they didn't get along with the neighbors? He didn't understand why Beth wanted to move. Their apartment was small but broken in. And they could find room for the baby when it came, he thought.

“So, Joe, can we please take it. I know you’re not a fan of change, but this is a necessity for us.”

Beth rested her head on his shoulder, nuzzling her nose into this neck. His heart was thumping fast, seeking an escape. Finding it harder to breathe, Joe’s body became rigid, but his brain was burning hotter than crimson fire. There was nowhere to go, trapped.

“Okay, I guess we will take it,” Joe said.

“Great. I will bring over the paperwork for you to sign tomorrow afternoon,” the realtor said, fake smile removed.

A week later, Joe and Beth lay compacted on a brown couch in their new living room, boxes stuffed full of their belongings surrounding them. Joe had his arm wrapped over Beth’s body, imagining he was in his old apartment.

“What do you think we will be like ten years from now?” Beth said.

Unsure what to say back, Joe paused and readjusted himself to buy some time. He never planned that far in the future. For Joe, it was about staying comfortable and not making waves.

“I think we will be similar to who we are now.”

“I don’t want to be the same. I want to be able to say I conquered life. You know what I mean?” Beth said, turning to gaze into Joe’s eyes, her face illuminated from the moonlight pouring in from the windows that lined the walls.

“Sure,” Joe said.

Joe squints, trying to recall his dream while he awakens,

but it’s fleeting. His back is sore from sleeping on the couch, which is too small for his form. He stands, stretching and bending to alleviate the pain shooting down his spine. Surprised not to see Beth hovering above him, Joe is overcome with a sense of delight. Grabbing the last beer from the night before, he discovers a letter on the coffee table.

I hope I didn’t wake you this morning. Went to the grocery store.

Joe sips the warm ale and shuffles to the restroom to urinate. He has a limited amount of time to get ready for work if he wants to miss Beth’s return. After relieving himself, a picture hanging on the wall causes him to pause. He observes the black-framed photo of him and Beth holding Josh on the day they brought him home from the hospital. She is holding their newborn under his armpits. Joe is smiling, hugging Beth at the waist. The people in the picture seem to have a joyous life in front of them. Joe lifts the photo off the wall and sets it on the bathroom sink.

He semi-jogs into his bedroom and changes his clothes as quickly as he can. Pulling up his trousers, Joe hears the front door open. He is too late. For a split second he contemplates going out the window; however, he doesn’t believe he can fit through it, so he passes the idea off as ridiculous. He must face his wife.

“Joe, can you help me with the groceries,” Beth says from the other room.

He buttons his pants and makes his way to Beth in the kitchen. She is unpacking canned food and produce and stacking it in the cupboards. When he enters the room, he helps put the food away with haste.

“So, I was thinking we could get out of town this weekend, maybe go upstate,” Beth says.

“What is there to see upstate?”

Joe knows what is upstate: having to explain to his wife why he resents her, having to tell her about his jealousy of the life she got to live.

“I thought we could go on an adventure. You know, explore.”

“I think I have to work.”

“Can’t you get it off?”

“I have to work. That’s all there is to it,” Joe says, a touch of hostility resonating in his voice.

“What is your problem, Joe? Do you not love me anymore?”

Joe is caught off guard by the series of questions. What should he say? Tears stream from Beth’s green eyes and plop on the kitchen floor. In a panic, Joe pivots and marches out of the room. Beth follows him, reaching for his limbs.

“Please, Joe, don’t go.”

Shaking loose of his wife’s grasp, Joe vacates the house and hops in his truck and leaves. Driving away, he looks in the rearview mirror and watches as Beth crumples to her knees in the middle of the street, weeping.

Running into the station, Joe catches his breath, soaking in panic-stricken oxygen. Sparks of Beth crying in the street overtake his conscious. He sees himself as an old man, living alone and having no stories to tell his grandchildren. He sees a life wasted. Guilt punctures his heart. Fighting off the tragic images, Joe proceeds to the sound booth, where Dave, the evening DJ, is sitting on

the wheeled office chair. He taps him on the shoulder, and Dave jumps, causing the headphones on his head to fly off as he turns to face Joe.

“Whoa, Joe. You scared me.”

“I’m here to take over. You can go home,” Joe says, his voice raising a few octaves.

“You’re three hours early.”

“Just go, god dammit.”

“Okay. Fine.”

Dave stands up, snatching the headphones off the ground and laying them on the switchboard; then he tromps out of the booth. Clenching his fists, Joe flops in the chair left vacant. He closes his eyes, picturing himself and Beth on a deserted island, happy. The phone on the corner of the switchboard rings, sending Joe back to reality. Baarring, Baarring, Baarring. Joe scoots over to the phone and lifts the receiver, placing it next to his right ear.

“You shouldn’t treat your wife that way, Joe. She’s the best part of your miserable, pathetic life.”

“Who’s this?”

“You’re the one who chose to waste your life away. You can’t blame her for your mistakes. You let your fear of change shape you.”

“Who’s this,” Joe says, his vocal cords igniting with anger.

“You know who I am, Joe.”

Joe slams the phone down. He pretends nothing happened and drops the slim needle on a record to play “Why Do Fools Fall in Love,” a song by The Diamonds.

Before he can put the headphones on his ears, the phone rings. Baarrinng, Baarrinng, Baarrinng. Joe again picks it up and holds it to his right ear.

"You know you can't go back. Time is irreversible. This is what you decided, and this is the life you now must live."

"Leave me alone," Joe says, tears forming in his eyes.

"You sent her away. She doesn't belong to you anymore."

"I'm calling the police."

"I'm worried about you. I have been worried a long time. You are down a path that ends in darkness."

Joe drops the phone on the floor. He slowly pulls it back up by the cord until the receiver is in reach. He grabs it and places it back to his ear.

"Please never call here again."

"Let go of your jealousy. Stop blaming her for something you did. Stop blaming her for the wrong things."

Joe hangs up the phone, his mind falling back.

Today was the day that Josh left for college. He was accepted to Berkeley on a full-ride scholarship for engineering. Joe couldn't be any more proud of his son. The two finished packing Josh's things, and Joe inspected the empty room. The past eighteen years of his and Beth's lives were dedicated to their slender, blond-haired child. Joe's existence in that time was teaching Josh how to be a man—well, at the best of his ability. He taught him how to lob a baseball, how to shave, and how to survive on his own. Josh didn't need him anymore, other than for a quick buck to take a dame to the pictures.

"I'm going to miss this room," Josh said, resting his left arm on Joe's shoulder.

"Well, you always have a home here, son."

The two picked up a few boxes and headed downstairs, where Beth was waiting for them with a couple glasses of sweet lemonade. Joe sat the boxes down at the front door and sipped on his drink. His life was changing again, and it shook his nerves. As much as he was proud of his son, there was a part of him that was mad, more than he had been in a while. Now it was just him and Beth. He was afraid, because he no longer knew her. Beth changed throughout the years. She lived. She took on hobbies, went to parties with friends, and went to restaurants that served foreign foods that Joe couldn't pronounce. Beth invited Joe along the way but was always met with the same response.

The day before Josh's move, she told Joe she was ready to spend the rest of her life relaxing, enjoying her days and nights at home with him like he wanted the whole time, like when they didn't have any money coming in. Joe was too preoccupied with keeping things the same to grow with her and live his life. But he always had Josh as a buffer. That was the one connection he had left with Beth, and it was leaving.

"Hurry up, Dad. I'm going to be late," Josh said.

Joe placed his glass back on the tray and retrieved the boxes.

"You two have a safe trip," Beth said, awkwardly hugging Josh while trying not to displace the boxes he carried in his hands.

"We will," Joe said, walking out the door.

Two months ago Joe dropped Josh off at Berkeley, waving

goodbye to his safeguard of a son. Beth let go of her fresh lifestyle and was fitting into her new role as a pure housewife. Things were as Joe wanted ever since he was a scared teenager ripped from his home in San Antonio: unchanging, simple, and routine. When eleven p.m. struck, Joe left for work with one of three different meals packed by Beth. Then at six a.m., he drove home, and Beth would kiss him on the cheek, followed by a few hours of watching the local news and reruns of Gunsmoke prior to bed. This was his life. This was who he wanted to be, a creature of habit, void of spontaneity.

Day after day the two played out their roles. Joe wanted to feel fulfilled, but his body slowly drained of its identity. He was empty. He lived for the sake of living. This was not what he expected to feel when his life shifted to a constant. Beth's face disgusted him. He had ill intent toward his wife. Regret lined his bones. He despised how she lived her life when she had her chance and how content her smile was. Jealousy fueled his anger. He knew it was his fault that he was who he was, but she should have pushed him a bit harder. His body was too old to conquer life, too fragile to do much but to wait for death. On a cold February morning, Joe returned home from work. He got comfortable on the couch and turned on the television. Beth sat a plate of hot food on a TV tray in front of him without saying a word. She then planted herself in a rocking chair in the corner of the room, knitting a scarf. He analyzed Beth, from the wrinkles on her forehead, down to her aged body as she rocked in her chair, wondering: Do I still love her?

The next morning Joe sits in his truck in the driveway of his house, rehearsing his apology to Beth. After he gathers enough courage, he departs the vehicle and meanders toward the front door. He opens it and is surprised to see Beth packing her belongings. Cardboard boxes and suitcases line the right wall of the living room. The sight of them reminds Joe of when he and Beth

first moved in, of when his son left for college. Beth is throwing some clothes into one of the boxes when she looks up and notices Joe standing at the door.

"What are you doing, Beth?"

"I'm leaving."

"Why?"

"I will not live in a house with a man who can't tell me he loves me."

Confusion catches Joe's tongue and he is unable to speak. He has imagined leaving Beth, but watching her exit his life is less rewarding. Wiping his face with his left palm, Joe feels flashes of his time with Beth. All he wants to do is run, run into her warm arms. His whole body, down to the last organ, is guilty of a crime.

"I'm going to stay with my mother in Sacramento."

His bewildered muscles free Joe's mouth in an attempt to fix things, but there isn't anything he can say but the practical.

"Fine. I understand."

Joe stares into Beth's green eyes, and the image of a classical painting reflects off her irises. He turns out of the doorway and hurries toward his truck, returning to the only other place he calls home.

Sadness lines the walls of Joe's heart, pumping it throughout his body by the means of his bloodstream. He flings open the door to the station and dashes in. Petestands in the middle of the lobby of the building, trying to figure out what is happening. Joe runs around Pete, hitting him and thumping him to the floor with his

shoulder, and into the studio. He locks the room behind him. Pounding on the door, Pete yells through the walls. Joe lifts the phone that sits idle on the switchboard, putting the receiver to his right ear.

“What are you doing, Joe?”

“I’m scared. Beth is leaving me. I know I have been a bad husband, a bad person, in the past few years, but you have to tell me how to fix things. I can’t lose her. Please, help me,” Joe says, crying.

“Fear caught up with you, like it does to everyone.”

“Please.”

“You have fought me your whole life. Why should I help you now?”

“Please, please, please. She is going to leave me. I can’t live without her. I just can’t.”

Joe starts pacing, entangling the phone cord between his legs. His mouth is dry, his palms sweaty. An ocean of hope pours from the receiver. It’s the only thing remaining to comfort him. It’s the last solace to his regrets, his oldest friend. It too cannot turn its back on him.

“I once knew this kid that hated rhubarb.” Pete stops banging on the door.

“It’s just so hard. I swear I try.” Joe hears Pete rummaging through a desk in a corner of the station.

“He hated it even though he never took a single bite, even when his grandma told him it was as tart as candy.” The doorknob in the studio turns to the left. Joe assumes Pete is unlocking the door with his spare key.

“I tell myself I have nothing to fear. I tell myself there’s nothing to fear.”

“Then, one day, the grandma forced the kid to eat the rhubarb. She told him that she wouldn’t make him anything but it. The kid went hungry most of the day, defiance working against him. But when his hunger grew, he gave in. When the child sank his teeth into the red stalk, he proclaimed it was the best thing he had ever eaten.

He wanted nothing but rhubarb. The grandma shook her head, holier than thou.”

The studio door launches open.

“It was the best thing I had ever eaten.”

Pete rushes into the studio, smacking and spilling a trashcan of crumpled papers with his right leg.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Pete says, yanking Joe backward. “Who are you on the phone with?”

“Oh, sorry about that. I was just trying to make dinner reservations for Beth and me tonight.”

Joe hangs up the phone. With snot oozing from his nose and tears streaming from his eyes, he places a record on the player. After raising the never-changing needle, he drops it on the vinyl and plays “When My Dreamboat Comes Home,” a song by Fats Domino. He smiles and marches out of the studio.

Will Musgrove is a senior in journalism with a minor in English. He enjoys staying up late and being angry at his past self in the morning. He also enjoys rooting for the Boston Red Sox, painting along with Bob Ross, and quoting classical literature. After graduation, he wants to travel the country like Jack Kerouac.