

THE WAY OF SQUID

This is the story about how my life became perfect. It is also the story of the echo which pulled everything into alignment. And it is the story about a friend I had named Squid who was with me the first time I heard the echo. This was back in the winter of '85. Jerry Garcia was still alive. The Stones were still un-reunited. Nancy Reagan was still trying to get kids to say no and we were seniors in high school.

Squid's real name was Anthony Doloro. Everyone called him Squid because he always wore a black stocking hat hung loose on his head and his dark hair would fall in slick strands from the bottom. The hat and his hair combined to form what looked like a squid sitting on top of his head. He wasn't handsome, he knew it and oddly all the girls in high school were attracted to him because of this. He had a complexion like gravel and cold green eyes the color of moss. Squid lived somewhere deep behind these eyes. It was impossible to tell the distance between where Squid lived and his eyes. It was far, that much is certain. This is also the story about that place.

We did the same thing everyday after school. Six minutes after the last bell, we were in my black Cutlass

diesel in a line of cars waiting to leave the parking lot. Squid in the passenger seat with the car rumbling like a World War II bomber, we would light cigarettes and blow smoke out the windows. The same tape, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, was always playing. It had been lodged in the radio of my car for months now. We knew every word and every note of every guitar solo. We agreed that there are surely worse tapes to be lodged in the radio.

By two forty-five, we were driving through the subdivisions. We were not on our way home. Squid would pull a frisbee from beneath his seat. He would turn it upside down on his lap and take a bag of pot and some rolling papers from the front pocket of his jeans. He would sift through the seeds and stems as the suburban mailboxes scrolled past. At two fifty, we were high with nowhere to go, nothing to do and all the time to do it.

We would drive around for a couple hours everyday after school without any real destination. It was like pacing in a car. We judged the distance of travel by the time it took to smoke cigarettes and joints. The distance between school and the bowling alley, for example, was a one joint one cigarette ride. From the bowling alley to the gas station was one cigarette. The distance between my house and Squid's was one joint. This is what everyone else we knew in high school did too. Gathering in groups of twos and threes and driving the neighborhoods. We would pass each other and sometimes wave. Other times, we stop, roll down the windows and compare our nothing with our friends' nothing.

“What are you guys doing?”

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“Nothing. What about you?”

“We’re not doing anything.”

“You know about anything happening later?”

“No, haven’t heard about anything.”

“All right, see ya.”

“Bye.”

Squid was a good person to hang out with. He had the innate ability to do nothing. Some people never got the idea that there isn’t really anything to do. They would sit too close to their skin and fidget or twist inside themselves. They would tap their fingers against the dashboard, curse and complain about the nothing. Squid wasn’t like that. He sat deep inside and just watched the houses, fast-food restaurants and strip malls roll by. We would drive for hours and it didn’t really matter because we both knew it is better to be stoned in a car than to be stoned at home.

There was nothing right with my home life before I heard the echo. I come home around five still stoned from driving around with Squid. I walk in the back door of the kitchen which swarms with little white ducks all wearing blue bow-ties. They’re on the curtains, the dishtowels, the pot holders. They seem happy enough. My mother sits at the table reading the home/living section of the paper. Coupons torn out at her elbows. She half looks up from the paper and asks, “How was school?”

“School was school,” I say and she returns to the paper.

My mouth is dry. I get some water out of the refrigerator. The refrigerator has magnets with the same

ducks on them. Speckles, the voiceless child comes in. She's my parents' dog. They got her a couple years ago and call her their last child. An overweight spaniel mix of some sort. After they had her for about six months her barking became too much for them so they had the voice box taken out of their last child. She still makes the gestures of barking but her jaws flap in silence. I pet the voiceless child in the kitchen then go to my room in the basement. Speckles follows me.

I pass my father on the way. He sits in his caramel recliner in the living room reading the sports section of the same newspaper my mother reads from the kitchen.

"Hey pops," I say as I pass.

"Hey Mark," he says as he reads.

In my room, I sit on the corner of my bed with the door closed and play my unplugged electric guitar to the dog without a voice until my father comes down, knocks twice at the door and says, "Dinner's ready."

There is never conversation over dinner at my house. The things my parents say don't require any kind of response. Just facts thrown out to the air in general: "Chicken's good," "We're going to need some new curtain rods in the bathroom," "Car's running a little rough this week." Speckles is curled under the table and sometimes I wonder if it's always been like this for them, talking to no one in particular about nothing in general or if they just ran out of things to talk about somewhere along the way.

After dinner, I lie to my parents and say, "I'm going to spend the night at Squid's." I'm actually going

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to spend the night at Terri's. Terri is my girlfriend but my parents don't know anything about her.

My father dries a plate with a happy duck dish-towel. He asks, "No homework tonight?"

I never bring home homework. We both know this but he asks anyway and I say, "Nope."

I grab my jacket out of my room. On my way out the back door of the kitchen I say, "See ya tomorrow." Speckles barks a couple silent barks, my parents say good-bye and I leave them alone with their divided newspaper, their voiceless child and their happy ducks.

Terri was older than me, twenty-three when we started dating. Though dating really isn't the right word for how we started. There were no movies or dinners or anything like that. Our dating consisted of two hours parked behind the strip-mall where she worked. She's a beautician and I went in to get my hair cut. Graduation was about nine months away and my father was set on me having a job before that day. He said a hair cut was the first step in that process. So there I was, in the holding area of the salon where she worked. I was sitting in a pink vinyl chair flipping through an out of date Time magazine when she called my name, "Mark, you're up."

She led me to chair, wrapped a pink sheet over my shoulders and chest, snapped it around my neck and told me I smelled good.

I had smoked a joint in the parking lot before I went in. I looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her reflection smiled at me and I smiled back. Her hair shifted its color in the salon light from chocolate to blood then back again. Her reflection was wearing a name tag. It said, "Terri."

As she cut my hair, I asked her reflection what time it had to work till.

Her reflection said seven and continued cutting my hair.

I asked if she wanted to get stoned after work.

Her reflection stopped cutting for a moment, looked at my reflection and said, "Sure."

I went back at seven for our first and only date. She walked out of the salon and I got out of my car and opened the passenger door of my car for her. It seemed important to do things like that on our first date. I got back in and asked her if she knew of a place we could go and smoke. She told me to just pull around to the back of the strip-mall. I did and we smoked a joint parked next to a dumpster looking at the various back doors of the various strip mall stores.

We talked and smoked for a couple hours. We talked about the concerts we had seen and about the best pot we had smoked and so on. I suppose we seemed compatible enough because after a while she asked me if I'd like to come over to her place. She said it wasn't far. It wouldn't have mattered if it was. I said that sounded nice and pulled the car back around front. She pointed her car out to me and told me to follow her. By the time we arrived at her apartment our relationship had begun. Nothing was said but we both knew I was already her boyfriend and she was my girlfriend. Our courtship behind the strip-mall had been a success.

Terri was the most well-groomed woman I had ever seen. I thought it probably went with the profession. Her hair always looked like she had just finished styling it. Her mascara never ran and her cuticles were al-

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ways manicured. Even her pubic hair was well-groomed. She kept it trimmed in a neat little triangle. It was like a guide-post of tight brown curls. “You are here.” I began to think that it was probable all beauticians probably had their pubic hair trimmed in some way, maybe a trade secret.

Her neatness and grooming didn't stop at her appearance. It extended out to her well-kept apartment, her washed and vacuumed car and even her hobby was done in a neat orderly fashion. Her hobby was cocaine. That's what she called it and I agreed that its good to have a hobby. She had a silver tin, originally used for some kind of blush or facial powder, filled with neat little packets, folded into neat little rectangles containing the powder which would turn into neat little lines on a neat little mirror that she would snort with a rolled twenty dollar bill into her neat little nose. When she dipped her head down to the mirror with her straw of U.S. currency, her neck would bend graceful as a swan and you could tell this had been a hobby of hers for a while. She was good at it. I spent a lot of nights doing cocaine and having sex with Terri around the first time I heard the echo. It felt good for about six months until it looked like the echo was gone for good and then all of her grooming and well-kept everything became unbearable.

The first time I heard the echo was at band practice. The band was me, Squid and One Lung Juan. I was the only member who didn't have a nickname. Juan would call me “Marco” sometimes but it never really stuck. Mostly I was just Mark. I played guitar, Squid played bass and One Lung Juan played drums. I had

heard Juan's story about his one lung probably a couple hundred times. It wasn't a long story. It went like this: when he was born his right lung decided not to take even its first breath. He would say that it knew better than to even try. Every time I heard the story I couldn't help but imagine the tiny lung hanging like a baby's foot somewhere in his chest still waiting for its cue to begin. The lung that decided to give life a try ended up enlarging to almost double its size to make up for the difference. The shape of Juan's chest testified that the story was true.

We practiced at Juan's house because his parents sound-proofed their garage so they couldn't hear his drums. The garage had layers of foam and blue shag carpet stapled to the walls and ceiling. I think Juan's parents felt guilty about the fact that he only had one lung. Before practice he would move his parents' car to the curb and me and Squid would unload our amps from the trunk of my car. We played our distorted rock-n-roll to an audience of bicycles and lawn mowers and electric grills. We knew some AC/DC, some Led Zeppelin, some Black Sabbath. We thought we were pretty good. We weren't but if it wasn't for band practice I never would have discovered the echo.

The first time I heard it was late into one of our practices and things weren't going well. We were out of dope, each of us wanted to play different songs and we were ignoring each other and playing whatever we wanted. At first it was a jumble of sound like three songs blowing stop signs and colliding over and over again. After a couple minutes the confusion of the three separate pieces did something strange and for a second or two, time wa-

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vered and held still. It stretched out long enough for the different rhythms to fall into place together. They didn't fuse into one, they stayed separate but somehow I could hear how they were woven into each other. Each note and beat hit or missed exactly where it was supposed to. It was like a musical engine with a piston firing in its own rhythm, a crank twisting to another, and a cog turning in its own time on a different side of the same engine. As separate as each of our parts were they still connected with each other. It was like a tapestry of sound that I had never heard before like it was meant to be played that way in some alternate universe.

When we stopped playing everything stayed in perfect alignment. Squid leaned his bass up against his amplifier perfectly. There was a pink Schwinn leaning against a wall behind him and for some reason it seemed inherently right for there to be a pink Schwinn leaning behind him. He raised a cigarette into the gravel of his face exactly the way he was supposed to. The bend of his elbow perfectly matched the bend of the Schwinn's handlebars. There was a oil stain on the garage floor between the three of us. It looked like a black dog standing on its hind legs. It seemed perfect at that moment that there would be an oil stain on the garage floor and that it would look like a black dog standing on its hind legs. One Lung Juan looked over at me and said, "Weird stuff, Marco." Which for some reason seemed like the exact right thing for him to say with the exact right shade of blue shag carpet stapled behind him.

That was end of band practice for the night but the state of perfection lingered on. As me and Squid took

our guitars and amplifiers back out to my car everything was still right. The streetlights reflected a perfect line of light off the roof of my car. The key fit perfectly into the lock of my trunk. Juan was standing in the doorway of the lit garage. He was a perfect silhouette in a perfect rectangle. Me and Squid got in the car and Juan waved good-bye perfectly from his rectangle. We waved drove off into the first perfect night of my life.

We listened to *The Dark Side of the Moon* on the way home which is what we always listened to but it was different this evening. Every chord and drumbeat and lyric line was exactly right and fell into perfect alignment with the sleeping houses and street signs that went past. The songs would begin or end or start their chorus at precisely the same moment that a traffic light switched its colors or a turn signal began to blink on a car in front of us. The universe was moving in perfect time, the way it was supposed to and it was beautiful.

Even when I got home after dropping Squid off at his perfect house everything was still right. My parents were asleep when I walked into the kitchen. I turned the light on and for the first time I understood what the ducks meant. They were happy because they knew the universe moved exactly the way it should. In its own time. To its own rhythm. Speckles came up and barked a couple silent barks to me and even this was perfect in a way that I couldn't really understand.

I slept in a state of deep perfect slumber that night and when I woke up the next morning everything was still exactly right. It was Saturday and my bedspread was a shade of perfect green. I got out of bed. My par-

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ents had gone somewhere and I roamed the house for hour that morning just looking at how exactly right everything was. It was like walking through a beautiful still-life where the composition could be arranged in no other way than it was. The lamps and tables and curtains and the light falling across it was exactly the way it was supposed to be. No matter which angle I looked at the furniture or the walls or the windows it always formed a perfect composition.

I remember testing this rightness of composition in the kitchen that first morning. A coffee mug was sitting beside the sink and it was perfect in its position. Its handle arced with the curve of the faucet. The sun cast a perfect half-moon on its rim. The composition was exact so I moved the mug about three inches to the left. The composition became different. The handle didn't arc with the faucet anymore. And the perfect half-moon became a perfect quarter moon. The composition reconfigured around the line descending from the cupboard and the way it accented the center of the mug. It was a different perfect composition. I moved the mug back to its first placement and the perfect composition of faucet and half-moon came back.

My life stayed in this state of perfection for days after I first heard the echo. Every tiny little piece of my life, every color, texture, sound and sensation was intricately connected to every other tiny little color, texture, sound and sensation of my life. Even high school and my parents became perfect in their own way. There was no need to think or concern myself with anything because it all was moving in a beautiful state of its own alignment.