

Voices

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It was weird. I was sitting in my office the other day eating my sandwich, listening to the radio, listening to an interview with this Hollywood director, the guy who did the original *Manchurian Candidate*, the one with Frank Sinatra—I think it came out back in the 60s. I can't remember the man's name. Pleasant voice though. Very articulate, informative, very chit-chatty—nice to listen to. The interviewer—I've listened to her a thousand times—a little pedantic, but okay. Anyway, the director is talking about working on the film, on the *Manchurian Candidate*, about how the thought of working with Sinatra intimidated him, and then he spoke about his own military career, because it had something to do with the military part of the story, how he put together the movie. He also talked about his wife and kids, even what he was going to have for lunch after the interview. He said he was on this diet, and his doctor told him he had to lose some weight. Then the interviewer said, We're going to take a short break. You are listening to my interview with so-and-so, director of the original *Manchurian Candidate*. So-and-so died in 1991. We'll be right back.

Shit, I almost choked. I'm listening to a dead man! dead for thirteen years! It freaked me out. I mean, sure, I've seen shows and listened to the radio, and everybody had been dead for years, but I *knew* this, I knew it beforehand—I was in the right frame of mind. But this guy, this man with the nice voice, *he* wouldn't be back after the break. His voice would be back—but not him. *He* was dead. His voice, it was dead too of course, but it didn't *sound* dead. It sounded matter-of-fact alive—lively in fact. I'd in some strange way started a little relationship with this guy, like I was going to follow his work or something—at least get the video and watch the *Manchurian Candidate* again. Damn, it was like they took his voice out of a box so we could listen to it, like the interviewer remembered one day, Hey, Jim, remember so-and-so? We have that interview, right? Why don't we replay it next week, to fill that spot on Thursday.

Well, after “the break,” I tried to listen but I was too distracted. I kept wanting this guy to be alive, like his voice seemed to be alive. I liked him. He was polite, intelligent, witty. But I just kept thinking stupid things like, He won't be having lunch today, he won't be leaving the studio. No wife, no kids, no future projects, no running into Frank in Vegas—nothing.

My sister-in-law, maybe she did this to me. My brother died last year. It was awful. My brother and I are—were—about the same age, so naturally I thought he was a little young to die. I really miss him. Anyway, we had the funeral. It was terrible. Then everyone went home, different cities, states, etc.

I didn't call my sister-in-law for several weeks. I figured she needed to have some time to process the whole horrible ordeal. Then one day I decided to call her. Ring, ring, ring. Nothing. Then the answering machine comes on: "Hi, this is Bill. I can't come to the phone right now..." It took my breath away! It was my brother...I mean, his voice! And he was dead! I never thought I would...god, I was stunned. But I was in a dilemma. I was thinking, how do I do this? How do I leave a message? I mean, was I supposed to just wait through the message, act like, Oh, hey, just calling, nice to hear Bill's voice again? Or do I say, What the fuck! What the fuck are you thinking? You haven't changed your answering machine?

I left a message, of course, and pretended it was all normal as hell. Hi, just checking in, etc., and hung up, addled, really disturbed. Sometime later I spoke to one of my nephews, one of my brother's sons. I asked him what he thought. He said it freaked him out too. But he was getting used to it, he said. It was getting where he could sort of ignore it. Sort of ignore it? I said. Just tell her to take it off the goddamn machine! He would mention it to her, he said, but he didn't think she would take it off, because she told him she liked to call home from work during the day so she could hear it! What? I said, she does this daily?

Anyway, now I'm back listening to this guy on the radio, and of course I started thinking about my brother, and the nice man from the *Manchurian Candidate*—these two voices rather. Bill hadn't come to the phone and what's-his-name won't be eating lunch today. Then, then I had this thought: Call Bill. Maybe I *did* want to hear his voice. So I sat there for a moment. I check my watch. My sister-in-law had to be at work still. So I went over and closed my office door. I went back to my desk. Should I do this? I picked up the phone. I punched in the number. Three rings, and then:

"Hi, this is Sarah. I can't come to the phone right now..."