DEAD AIR

by Greg Ryhno



CHAPTER 1

Eden Mills
Writers' Festival

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"I'm with you, I'm with you," the voice sang, "even when I'm peeing …"

Jake looked up at his mother, eyes bright, the great circle of his mouth reshaping to accommodate joy and astonishment.

"Did you hear that?"

Holly had heard it. By now, the intimate interactions of those who lived within a six mile radius of their little house no longer surprised her. The woman singing to her child was just the latest in a series of unusual transmissions.

"I'm peeing, I'm peeing, but even still, I'm with you …"

The boy let out a hard punch of laughter. "Oh my God!"

Holly's brother Simon had produced the walkie-talkies at Christmas—one for his daughter Sadie, and one for Jake—so the cousins could talk to each other. The description on the packaging promised twelve channels, two-way radio sub-channels, crisp, clear sound quality, and a six-mile communication range. Despite their bright colours (Jake's was bright orange—his favourite), and ergonomic design for "little hands," the new toy was by all accounts a real walkie-talkie, and imbued with a kind of adult magic, like cellphones or car keys.

Jake and Sadie agreed upon a Same-Bat-Time-Same-Bat-Channel arrangement, and for a week or so, they were good about reaching out through the airwaves to one another.

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Of course, like all best laid plans of seven year olds, the communications came to a sudden and unceremonious end, and Holly assumed the device would soon be at the bottom of Jake's toybox, a vast depository of once-cherished plastic nonsense.

Instead, the boy started to explore the other eleven channels.

"Hello? Hello? Is there anybody out there?"

She listened to her son traverse an endless universe of white noise and disappointment.

"I repeat: is there anybody out there?"

Holly opened a bottle of Baco Noir. She knew that kind of disappointment all too well.

A few days later, Holly brought Jake home from school and he sat down at the kitchen table with the walkie-talkie in his hands. Holly was secretly pleased that Jake didn't want to play Minecraft or watch reaction videos on YouTube. She started getting dinner ready while the boy switched on the device. The little light beside the antenna burned red, and the LCD display glowed like ectoplasm. He began twiddling the knobs and, unexpectedly, they heard the sound of trickling water, as though a cheerful brook had found its way across the kitchen tiles.

"Huh?" Jake turned up the volume.

What they both heard next was unmistakably a fart. A full-bodied, whoopie cushion fart, amplified by what sounded like a ceramic bowl.

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The noise carved furrows into Jake's forehead, and he looked up at Holly with his eyebrows raised. A toilet flush cemented the moment's absurdity.

"Someone's going to the bathroom!" He laughed maniacally and looked down at the green mechanism with new wonder.

"Jake," Holly said, stifling a laugh of her own, "maybe you should turn it off. It's not nice to eavesdrop."

"No, no. Please," the seven-year-old negotiated. "What if I just turn to another channel?"

Jake twisted the knob, and they found themselves listening to a cornucopia of weird broadcast. There was an urgent conversation between administrators at the nearby high school, the colour commentary of a hockey game, a taxi driver calling dispatch, a cat meowing. It was only when they stumbled across the sound of two people having sex that Holly switched off the device.

Jake looked at Holly with worry in his eyes. "It sounded like that man was hurting her."

"I don't think so, buddy." She searched for some kind of explanation. "I think it was just somebody watching something on TV.

But still, Holly couldn't believe some of the things people shared on public airwaves. Sure, the woman on channel six was using the walkie-talkie as a baby monitor, but didn't she know that the whole neighbourhood could hear her? And that couple on channel three—were they exhibitionists? Did they get off on it?

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When she picked Jake up from school the next day, he wanted to listen to the walkie-talkie again. She agreed on the condition that he stay away from channel three.

"What about channel eleven?"

It was then that they heard the woman, serenading her child as she relieved herself.

"Okay. No more channel eleven, either."

As Jake trolled for transmissions, Holly got to work cutting up vegetables for his lunch the next day. Jake wouldn't eat them, of course, but she didn't want to be caught in the crosshairs of his teacher's concern. Already, there had been emails home—too few vegetables, too much sugar, forgotten snow pants, uncombed hair—and now, Holly worried constantly over these minor infractions. David's absence had invited a new kind of scrutiny into their lives.

Jake tuned to channel nine, and again, they heard the sound of running water. Holly was about to tell him to change it, when something made her stop.

"Are you scared?"

It was a young woman's voice.

"Of course I'm scared," a man replied, his voice distorted by the poor signal, "but this is a good thing."

The water stopped, like a tap shutting off.

"Are we going to be okay?"

Holly frowned. "I know that voice."

"Is it someone who lives close by?" Jake asked. "Like, maybe, Mrs. Puddephatt?"

Holly frowned. Had she seen this woman in the neighbourhood? Maybe navigating a stroller down a snowy sidewalk?

"Of course we're going to be okay."

"I'm not sure who it is." She reached over Jake's shoulder and turned up the volume on the green walkie-talkie, but the conversation dissolved into the static.