

## The Radios of September · *Craig Loomis*

AROUND THE MIDDLE OF AUGUST Mama always starts to go bad. Any other time and she's all right, but come August and then September with its deer season, and she begins to go bad. And although it's usually very hot and heavy during those two months that has nothing to do with it. It's the remembering that makes her give up like that. By the middle of September she's weak and thin, and somebody else's mother.

At first we thought it might have been a good idea if we talked about him: about the way he used to part his hair down the middle, about how he used to set his clothes out the night before the first day of school. We'd be sitting around the dinner table eating her food, passing her carrots, peas and potatoes; and then for a while we'd eat in silence: the tinkling of silverware, the soft scraping of plates. But then I'd suddenly remember the time he fell out of the old oak, breaking his arm the day before Little League. "And how about the time he decided it was time for a change and painted his room black." Of course Dad would try to help by smiling and nodding when he remembered too, but most of the time he simply sat there, chewing and watching her out of the corner of his eye. "Remember how funny he looked when he took that piece from the old vacuum cleaner and made it into a space helmet?" I'd wave my fork to show her just how funny it looked on his head. She'd show us that little smile of hers, and her eyes would glisten, but in the end she'd have a white-tight grip on her fork.

All that dinnertime talk happened at the beginning, two maybe three years after John. That was before we realized she didn't want it that way, that she wanted it all soft and quiet and inside. After those first years we decided to do it her way.

That deer season I was lucky because I was young. But Dad had been in the war and knew exactly what it was all about. And we used to beg him for a story or two but he'd always put us off, saying, "It happened such a long time ago." Still, there was that Christmas when Uncle Otto drove up and surprised us with yo-yos and cap guns and them with a dark bottle of wine. As a rule Mama didn't drink but, for the sake of Christmas, had one glass. We'd never seen her drink wine before so to get a better look we secretly slipped out and watched her through the window. At first it was awfully

funny, the way she'd sip and make a funny face, and we had to run away from the window or she would have heard us. Finally, after three or four sips, she stopped making funny faces, and we went back to our toys.

Uncle Otto was a good man. He brought us presents on Christmas and sent us money on our birthdays; once or twice he even invited us to spend the weekend with him, but we never went. He was a good man. While Mama sipped, Dad took long drinks. He drank like he'd been drinking a long time, but we knew he hadn't. Towards the end, when the sun was going down and we had long since given up on Mama making any more funny faces, they started talking about the war.

"We had them on the run, didn't we?" said Uncle Otto.

"Yes, yes, on the run," said Dad, taking another long drink. That's the way it went: first Uncle Otto and then Dad; the rest was all tanks and Guam and kamikazes.

"Come on George, what was it like on those beachheads? And those shellings, how about that? Banzai, how about that? Did they really scream that? Come on George, what'daya say?"

But Dad was a better drinker than Uncle Otto, and he never gave in.

With Mama it was different. She'd never been to war. She'd never seen death come too soon until John.

First there was August and then September and then deer season, and I had to stay there and watch her go bad every year.

"Hot." She looked up into the clouds of September. "Don't remember it ever being so hot for September." Except for the dogs and the birds there was nothing but quiet. Dad was at the mill. He'd be gone by the time I'd get up and sometimes wouldn't get back until late, when I was already half-asleep. There was that one summer three or four years ago when I didn't see him for five days straight. Like the war, he never talked about his job at the mill. He came home dirty, tired, and late, and there was that one time when I didn't see him for five days straight.

"What do you think? Ever remember a hotter September?"

I looked into the sky as if I were taking some kind of measurement, and of course it wasn't hot at all. "One of the hottest." And then I picked up a rock and threw it as far as I could up on the hillside. The old white dog saw me, and when the rock skipped in the dirt, he pricked up his ears and took off running. He got about half-way up the hill before changing his mind.

She watched the dog go up and back, and then she nodded and went back to hanging the clothes on the line. "Hot. One of the hottest Septembers I've seen." The white dog wagged over to her because he thought she was talking to him. "Hot. Just too damn hot." He sat down next to the basket, hung his tongue out and smiled up at her.

Mama was like that come September and deer season: the way she'd hang the clothes on the line and then come back ten minutes later, adjust the clothespins, and then walk back into the house and bring out the food for the dog and then walk back over to the line, straighten the sleeves on the shirts, and then walk over and give the dog some water; and the shirts would flap in the breeze and that would startle her, and the dog would stop eating to look up to see what was wrong. And I'd sit there in the shade of the porch and watch her.

Any other time she never seemed to care for music, but by the middle of August she'd have the old Philco out of the closet and in the kitchen. No sooner would Dad be out the door, lunch pail under his arm, than the radio would go on and she'd go to John's room to clean it again. She kept a lot of old photographs in that bottom drawer of his—of faded birthday parties and old forgotten uncles and aunts, of murky Christmas mornings. She'd sit there on the hard wooden floor and stack those photographs into neat little towers. She was always cleaning his room during those long two months; and that old radio would be playing at one end of the house, and Mama would be at the other end, dusting and sweeping and going through those yellow photographs.

She didn't cry about him anymore; she'd worked clear of that. But this other way, this being scared of her own washing, of standing out under the trees to watch the sunset, of cleaning a clean room, it all seemed to make it worse. Like having an infection and then not caring about taking the medicine anymore, she let John take her away like that every deer season.

In the beginning we'd always gone down to the creek to wait for the big bucks to come out to drink. Come twilight they'd slip down out of the hills and wait along the green shadows of the creek. Of course we couldn't see them but they were there. An occasional rustling, the snapping of a twig, the scolding of a bluejay, but they were there. The shadows would grow greener and then purple blue, and then the frogs would start. We'd already taken our places between the boulders. They were just two fat

rocks, all gray and dimpled on their northern sides, but the way they lay there, like two impossible eggs, we'd always half-thought that there was something ancient, even prehistoric in their centers. I'd turn to measure the twilight one last time, and except for a small slit of sunlight way up at the top, the rest of the hillside would be cool and gray. Waiting until sometimes we'd be just about ready to give it up when suddenly one of them would peek through—its soft black nose twitching and sniffing at the air. I'd nudge John just to make sure that he was seeing what I was seeing, and he'd always frown back at me. Once they'd decided the air was good they'd step out of the shadows and pick their way over the rocks. The frogs and crickets stopped. Their shoulders would shift and roll; and in the end their black noses sank slowly into the water. As they drank, lifting up to test the air just to make sure, we'd carefully take aim with those invisible rifles of ours, squeezing the triggers. And like puppets having suddenly been robbed of all their strings, those big water-drinking bucks would drop into the creek; their leftover nerves jerking in the half-water, great brown eyes rolling crazily. Just to make sure we'd squeeze those triggers one last time. The water would grow red. It was then, after killing them three or four times, that we'd raise up and yell down. There'd be a panic of white water, of galloping underbrush, and that would be the end of it.

But he grew up and when that happened he went on his first real hunt with the Ross brothers. Although the Ross brothers were older, they were all right. Frank Ross was the oldest, seventeen, and he liked telling people what to do—even when there was nothing to be done he liked telling others what to do. Still, when he wasn't giving orders, he was all right. They lived around the bend about a mile or so. I remember Mama once took Mrs. Ross an apple pie for Christmas.

I wanted to go with them, but, of course, Frank Ross wouldn't have it. I went back and sat down on the porch. I'd never seen John carry a real rifle before, and as he walked up the hill he looked kind of funny, as if he'd known all along what to do. After a while the afternoon started to fade, and I left the porch for the grass. I listened for them but it was almost too quiet to tell.

When the sun went down, they came out on the porch to wait. The white dog was over by the roses gnawing. A thin breeze came down off the hillside and he picked up his head to give it a smell. It was right after the breeze that the faint thunder of shots echoed out of the hills. The dog

jumped. Arms folded, standing on the steps, she whispered to him. I got up and walked the fenceline until the first star came out.

They brought him in out of the darkness wrapped in a white sheet. Somebody said, "This way," and they turned and took him in the back door. As they shuffled down the hallway, one of them brushed against Mama's green vase. It swayed, and just when it looked like it was going to right itself it didn't, smashing against the floor. They kept on shuffling down the hallway. The springs squeaked when they put him down on the bed. And when they left, one of them stepped on a piece of Mama's broken vase, grinding it into the rug. Once they were gone I tried getting mad about the way they had broken her vase, had crushed it into the rug. But I couldn't. He was in there all quiet and white on his bed, and I couldn't find the anger. I was tired from wanting to go with them, from waiting for them to return, from hearing the shots and then from waiting some more; I was tired from hearing the Ross brothers cry, and I was tired from seeing them carry him out of the night and into his room. I wanted to get mad but it just wouldn't come.

It was after they left that she began. At first it was something quiet and little, but suddenly it jumped to a deep, buried moaning, like that of some animal trapped under tons of dirt and rock. Behind the closed door of his room, I could hear her moaning a hundred miles underground. I tried going to her but the door was locked.

"Go away."

"But it's me."

"Go away."

"But it's me. It's me."

"Go away. Go far away."

I hurried out and tried peeking in the window, but the curtains were pulled tight, the lights off. In the end I sat there on the steps, on the porch and looked up into the trees. I tore off one of her big yellow flowers, and when the dog came over to see what it was all about I threw it at him. He sniffed it and looked at me. I tore off another and this time bounced it off his nose. He wagged his tail and sniffed at that one too. In the end, he trotted off into the shadows with one of the flowers. The steps were smooth and cool and after a while they began to help. The stars were out. When I looked up into the trees, I saw the faces of branchy old men and women. A

new breeze fingered off the hill, rustling the leaves; and the next time I looked up those old ladies had dark pointed beards, the men long impossible noses. It was then, as I leaned back to let the cool steps work on my elbows, that I heard it. It was like a baby crying, but that couldn't be right. And so it came again. Like an angry baby crying, but no, there was something else. It came from the darkness, from the foothills. The white dog came running out of the shadows to stand next to me. The breeze had stopped. The leaves were still. His fur bristled, and he growled into the darkness. The stars glistened and she was in there with him. Again, but a hissing from the trees. Paw-quiet, it had crept in from the foothills, and now it was there among the trees. The dog whimpered. A rasping, and something loomed under the trees. In my scramble to the door I fell. I lunged for the door knob and squeezed. Suddenly a light shone from the bathroom window, the radio was playing. I listened. A breeze toyed in the trees, crickets played in the grass. It had gone back.

The dog came and sat next to me there on the steps. Together, we watched the moon come up.

Sometime during the middle of the night, deep unfamiliar voices moved through the house. Their footsteps were hard and determined and they walked right by me. I held the blankets tight and waited for it to be quiet again. It was always hot under the blankets, but that night in September, as I lay there waiting for morning, it was especially hot. Just before I fell asleep I remember feeling dizzy, almost sick.

The next time I looked up it was morning. It was still and gray, and a thin rain tapped at the window. No sound of bacon, no smell of coffee, no talk of dishes, only the rain at the window. That was the morning I folded the blankets the way she'd always wanted them folded: all even and smooth at the edges. And then I forgot all about last night and walked into his room. His bed was made, his closet shut. The top of his dresser was clean. He'd never kept the top of his dresser clean—a tiny mound of pennies, a jar stuffed with feathers and scraps of paper, rubber-banded baseball cards. A tree of lightning cut across the sky, and I went to the window to wait for another. I waited, but there was only the thunder; the glass quivered against my cheek. After a while even the thunder went away, and all that was left was the cool rain. It cried down the glass.