A SHORT STORY

RADIO 3

W HUXLEY OAKHAM

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a short story

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Gregory always set off early. Not by much — ten minutes, perhaps fifteen — but always enough, worked out in advance with a precision he'd never quite been able to explain to anyone who asked. He couldn't have told you why it mattered so much. Only that it did.

As he pulled off the drive, Radio 3 dropped into the opening bars of the Enigma Variations, and the sound system did what it always did with a good recording — filled the whole car with it, cleanly, no edges to the strings, as if the orchestra had simply moved in around him — and the whole business started up in his chest exactly the way it always did. The afternoon's programme was a retrospective, the presenter had explained — a long, unhurried trawl through highlights from seasons past, one piece leading into the next with only a few words between them. Gregory had smiled at the coincidence of it, the way he always smiled at coincidences that weren't really coincidences at all.

Nimrod. Elgar. He knew it by heart the way you know your own address — could have hummed it from memory in his sleep, could probably have conducted it, badly, with one hand on the wheel — and yet it still did the thing it had always done, every single time, without fail, since he'd first heard it played in full on a Sunday afternoon programme decades ago and had to pull the car over, that first time, tears blurring the road until he couldn't trust himself to keep driving.

He didn't pull over today. He'd learned to drive through it since. But he let the volume creep up half a notch, the way he always did without quite deciding to, and watched the fields either side of the lane roll past in long, unhurried strokes exactly in time with the strings building underneath him, the light doing something soft and grey-gold across a hillside off to his left just as the whole orchestra opened out, as if somebody up there had been waiting for this exact stretch of road to cue the swell. It happened more often than any sensible

person would believe. He'd stopped trying to explain it to people who hadn't felt it themselves. The countryside didn't know what was playing in his car. And yet.

There were a handful of CDs in the door pocket, as there always were — four or five, no more, shop-bought and long since scratched. He rarely played any of them. It wasn't the sound quality, though he could have given you, unprompted, a full technical account of exactly why FM sounded the way it did — the compression, the narrowed dynamic range, quiet passages lifted and loud ones gently reined in, a broadcast built to survive road noise and tinny speakers and a hundred thousand different rooms at once, rather than the wide, uncompressed swing a CD could afford you in a silent room with nowhere else to be. He understood the trade-off better than almost anyone. He simply preferred it.

What he actually loved, if he was honest with himself, had very little to do with fidelity at all. It

was the knowing. Somewhere out there, right now, in kitchens and cars and hospital waiting rooms and rooms he would never see and people he would never meet, this exact same broadcast was arriving in all of their ears at precisely the same moment his own radio was receiving it — not a private recording, summoned up whenever he pleased, but a single shared thing, happening once, together, whether anyone realised they were part of it or not. A CD was his alone. The radio made him one of a great many, all listening in the dark at once, and there was a particular, quiet thrill in that which the better part of fifty years' devotion had never once worn thin.

Variations. The word alone was enough, most days, to take him somewhere else entirely.

He'd been thirteen. 1978. Everyone he knew was either Bee Gees or Sex Pistols, one tribe or the other, no third option available as far as the rest of his year at school was concerned — and Gregory, who had tried both, sincerely, standing in his

bedroom attempting to feel something while John Travolta's soundtrack or Johnny Rotten's snarl played on a borrowed cassette, had felt precisely nothing either way. He remembered that specifically — not dislike, not rebellion, just a flat, faintly worrying blankness, the sense of being handed two different keys to two different doors and finding that neither one fit any lock he actually owned.

Then, on a wet Saturday with nothing else to do, he'd heard something on the radio he had no name for. A cello — he knew that much, or thought he did — but underneath it a drum kit, and a bass, and an electric guitar being played properly rather than politely, and over the top of all of it something he had no word for at all: a sound that swelled and bent and held, not quite an organ, not quite strings, not quite anything he'd ever heard come out of a person's hands. It went on for four minutes and it was entirely serious about itself from beginning to end. He stood quite still in the middle of the

kitchen until the announcer came back on and told him what it was. Andrew Lloyd Webber. Variations. He'd written it on the back of his hand with a biro so as not to lose it.

He bought it himself, a fortnight later, out of money he'd been saving for something else entirely and could no longer remember the point of. Walked into the shop, asked for it out loud, carried it home under his arm. The first record he had ever chosen on his own account rather than inherited, borrowed, or been given — the first thing, really, that he had ever gone out and got because he wanted it and for no other reason at all.

Paganini's theme, over and over, transformed. Cello and rock band and — he found the word eventually, off the back of the sleeve, and said it to himself several times to be sure of it — synthesisers. Two players' worth of them, as it turned out, and a whole page of names for the machines: a Mini Moog, an ARP Odyssey, a Roland, a Yamaha, something called a string

ensemble that was apparently pretending to be an orchestra and doing a rather good job of it. He read the list the way other boys read football programmes. Here was a keyboard that could make a sound nobody had ever made before, sitting in the same room as an instrument four hundred years old, and neither of them was winning. That was the thing he couldn't get over, and still couldn't, decades later. It sounded to a thirteen-year-old raised on Top of the Pops like a foreign language spoken with a completely straight face — serious, but not stuffy; modern, but not disposable. Nothing else he owned did both those things at once. He played it through twice that first afternoon, and again that evening, and went to bed a slightly different person than the one who'd got up that morning, though it would be years before he had the vocabulary to explain to anyone what had actually happened to him in his own front room.

Two of the lads asked to borrow it, once word got round that he'd bought something nobody had

heard of. He said no. He surprised himself with how quickly and how completely he said it — not rudely, not even really as a decision, more the way you'd decline to lend out your own hand. Instead he sat up that evening with the record deck and his father's tape recorder and a couple of blank C60s out of the pack he'd been given at Christmas, and made them a copy each, in real time, both sides, sitting perfectly still through the whole thing so as not to jog the needle. He wrote the track titles on the inlay cards in his best handwriting. He gave them out at school on the Monday and would not take anything for them.

They loved it. Both of them, properly, not politely — one of them came and found him at break the following week wanting to know what it was called and whether there was any more of it. That was the part Gregory hadn't expected, and it more or less set the pattern for the rest of his time at that school. Somebody would mention a piece, or overhear something coming out of his bedroom

window, and there would be another tape by the end of the week, tracklist and all, handed over at the gates and never charged for. He must have made dozens of them before he left.

He stopped once he'd gone, and never really started again. He couldn't have said why. Perhaps because after school you no longer have a ready supply of people you see every single day who might be one album away from the whole thing opening up for them. What did not stop, ever, in all the years since, was the rule underneath it — that he would copy anything for anybody, gladly, at any length, and would not under any circumstances let the record itself out of the house. I'll do you a tape, he'd say, already reaching for a blank one. But I don't lend the records out. Nobody ever pushed him on it. There was something in the way he said it, mild as it always sounded, that didn't invite a second attempt.

He never did manage to explain it, in the end. Not properly. Not to his parents, who found the sudden

appearance of orchestral records in their son's bedroom faintly baffling but harmless. Not to the other lads at school, who filed him, not unkindly, under bit different and left it at that. Nobody at thirteen wants to be filed under bit different. But there was, underneath the sting of it, something else too — a small, stubborn certainty that whatever this was, it was entirely his. Nobody had given it to him. Nobody could take it away either.

The Enigma Variations rolled on toward its close, and Gregory, driving through a stretch of England he'd driven through a hundred times before, felt the same thing arrive that always arrived — not nostalgia exactly, something closer to confirmation. Whatever tribe he'd been looking for at thirteen, in a room full of Bee Gees records and safety pins, he'd found it eventually, just not where anyone had told him to look.

Something gentler had taken over on the radio without his quite registering the change — strings only, low and unhurried, the sort of thing that

asked nothing of you and got given everything anyway.

The road opened out into a long, straight stretch, hedgerows giving way to something flatter and more distant, cloud shadow moving across a ploughed field off to his right in the same unhurried tempo as whatever had taken over from the Elgar, and Gregory — hands steady on the wheel, eyes on the road exactly as they had been the entire time, some quiet, practised part of him always tracking the mirrors, the gap ahead, the speed, even now — let the whole business of school and tapes and biro on the back of his hand fade the way memories did when there was nothing left to say about them, and found himself, instead, somewhere considerably further back.

His first Prom had been decided almost by accident — a Sunday afternoon programme mentioning, in passing, that if you were willing to stand you could get in for less than the price of a night out, on the door, no dress code, no season ticket, no

membership of anything, just turn up and queue. He'd checked twice, certain there was a catch buried somewhere in it, and had found, when he finally went, that there wasn't one. Nobody at the door had looked twice at his jeans. Nobody had asked what he thought he was doing there.

That, it turned out, had been the entire idea from the beginning. He read up on it afterwards, the way he read up on everything: a hall manager and a young conductor, back in the 1890s, deciding between them that serious music had no business being the private property of people with money and evening dress, and that the way to prove it was to keep the tickets cheap, let the audience stand, let them wander about and talk and eat if they wanted to, and simply play them the best of everything until they came back for more. Train the public by easy stages, the manager had said. Popular at first, and raise the standard from there. It had worked. It was still working. It was, as far as Gregory could tell, the only reason a boy from his sort of street

had ever ended up in that building at all, standing shoulder to shoulder with students and pensioners and shift workers and people who had come straight from an office, all of them there for the same reason and all of them having paid roughly nothing for the privilege.

He'd taken the train up, because that was what you did, with the Walkman in his jacket pocket and two C60s he'd made up himself the night before, and had spent the whole journey watching the scenery change from one kind of England to another with the foam pads of the headphones pressed over his ears. It happened somewhere around the second side of the first tape. A slow movement he'd taped off the radio a fortnight earlier came in underneath a long stretch of flat, wet fields going by at sixty miles an hour, and the two things fitted — not approximately, not as a pleasant coincidence, but exactly, the way a lid fits a jar, the countryside and the strings arriving at the same place at the same moment for no reason he could account for and no

reason either of them ought to have had. He sat up slightly. He rewound it and played it again to see whether it would happen twice. It did.

He had no idea, then, that this would go on happening to him for the rest of his life, on trains and later in cars, on motorways and in traffic and in towns he was only passing through. He knew only that it was the specific, unhurried pleasure of a journey with nowhere else to be, no reason to rush the arriving. By the time the train pulled in he'd already decided, without quite admitting it to himself, that this was going to become a habit rather than an outing.

A woman on the door had pressed a small paper flag into his hand without explanation, as though it went without saying, as though everyone simply knew to expect this, and it was only once he was inside, surrounded by people who plainly did know exactly what to do with a flag at a Prom, that he understood he'd stumbled into something with its own rules, its own private language, entirely intact

and functioning long before he'd arrived to learn it.

He stood for the whole programme. Nobody had told him he had to, but sitting seemed suddenly beside the point, in a room built for exactly this. He found his spot — the specific patch of standing room that felt, from the very first note, like the single best place in the entire hall to hear from, a discovery he made almost by instinct and then guarded, quietly, forever after, never once telling anyone where it was, not even the people he came to know well over the years that followed, because some things, he'd decided early on, were worth keeping to yourself even inside a tribe. Around him, people who'd clearly been coming for decades traded nods and shorthand he didn't yet understand, and he'd felt, for the first hour, exactly like what he was — an outsider standing at the edge of something old.

Then Elgar's Second Symphony had started, and by the third movement Gregory had stopped noticing that he didn't know anyone, stopped

noticing his own feet, stopped noticing anything at all beyond the particular ache the music produced somewhere behind his ribs, the same ache the Variations album had produced at thirteen, except larger now, and shared, several thousand people breathing in time with something none of them had written and all of them, in that moment, seemed to own equally.

It was the Last Night, weeks later, that undid him completely. He'd gone back for it almost as a dare to himself, not yet sure he'd earned the right, and had stood at the very same spot he'd claimed that first night, and watched the hall around him transform into something between a carnival and a congregation — flags everywhere, someone dressed, inexplicably and magnificently, as what he was fairly sure was meant to be a Beefeater, cheers going up for performers the way they might for a home team. When the Fantasia on British Sea Songs began, the whole promenade around him started stamping in time, a great percussive

competition against the orchestra itself, feet against strings, and Gregory, who had never in his life stamped his feet at anything, found himself doing exactly that, grinning like an idiot, entirely unable to stop.

Rule, Britannia! arrived, and the noise that went up around him wasn't really about the words, he understood later, whatever anyone watching at home on the television might assume from the flags and the singing. It was thousands of people who had each, in their own separate way, found their way here alone, making noise together on purpose, for no reason except that they could.

He didn't remember getting the train home that night. He remembered only that he'd bought a season standing pass before the following summer, and had never once, in all the years since, told a single person exactly where in that hall he liked to stand.

Three lanes of traffic moved around him, cars drawing level and falling back and drawing level again in a pattern that had no conductor and somehow kept perfect time anyway, and Gregory found himself, not for the first time, watching the whole carriageway the way he might watch a string section — dozens of separate decisions, made independently, second by second, that somehow amounted to a single flowing line when you stood back far enough to see it as one thing. Nobody out there was trying to move beautifully. It happened anyway, the way it always did, whenever enough people were doing the same thing at the same time without any of them thinking about it.

The mobile had cost him more than he wanted to admit to anyone, some years later, and he still weighed it in his pocket sometimes like it might not be entirely real. But it did the thing the adverts promised — small green letters on a small grey screen, a message sent out into the world for the price of a stamp and none of the wait.

He'd been talking to them since the winter, a dozen or so names in a chatroom nobody else he knew had ever heard of, all of them Prommers, all of them working their way through the season's programme the moment it was published and reporting back on what they'd booked. That was how it had started — comparing nights, arguing amiably about conductors — and it was only in about February that somebody had noticed how many of them were going to be in the building on the same evenings, and the whole thing had tipped over into something closer to a plan. By the time the season actually opened they had swapped names, dates, and standing preferences, and were all, in the slightly sheepish way of people who have made friends with strangers over a wire, genuinely looking forward to being in the same room at the same time without ever quite having met.

Every one of them had a spot. That was the thing about Prommers, and he'd known it long before he

ever found the chatroom: give a person a hall with no allocated standing and a season pass, and within two years they will have decided, with absolute conviction, that one particular square yard of floor or rail is the finest place to hear music in the entire building. Not a good place. The place. They arrived early to claim it, defended it politely against newcomers, and returned to it summer after summer with the quiet certainty of a congregation filing into the family pew. No two of them agreed. That was rather the beauty of it.

And they weren't wrong to care, either. Nothing in that hall came out of a speaker. Whatever reached them reached them the way it had reached audiences since the war — off the strings and the skins and the brass bells themselves, up through the air, off the dome, and into whichever square yard of the room they happened to be standing in. Move ten feet and you heard a different concert. Everybody in the building knew this. Almost nobody thought about why.

Gregory was where Gregory always was, down on the arena floor, near enough to the middle of the room that the whole hall curved up and away from him on every side. Ringers off. Keypads silenced. Nobody near any of them had the faintest idea anything was happening at all. He went down the list in the only order that made sense to him — alphabetical — and sent the same question to the first name on it.

Where are you standing?

The replies came back within minutes, one after another. Gallery, right side, by the rail. Arena, front left, behind the tall chap in the anorak. Circle, second row, waving now. And Gregory had looked up and around, tracking his way across the great curved wall of the place, finding them one by one — a hand lifted above the crowd three tiers up, another off to his left, another somewhere behind and above him — and had raised his own hand back to each in turn, and got, every single time, a grin he could make out clear across the hall from

people whose faces he had never once seen before that evening.

Then, through the interval and on into the second half, at intervals of his own choosing, the second question.

How does it sound from there?

A bit thin up here on the lower strings, everything else lovely. Brass a shade heavy from where I am, but you'd expect that. Perfect. Honestly, perfect. Timpani slightly ahead of everything else in this corner, no idea if that's you or me. Each answer arriving quietly in his pocket while several thousand people around them listened on, entirely unaware that a dozen strangers scattered from arena to gallery were, between them, describing the same performance from a dozen different points in the dark, to one man down among them who had asked them all, months earlier, whether they'd mind doing exactly this — and who was, at that precise moment, doing something about every

word they sent him.

They hadn't minded. Not one of them. They had, in fact, been delighted — the sort of delight that comes from being handed a small job that matters and being trusted to do it properly — and had gone on doing it every season after that, for years, without ever once being asked twice.

Somewhere around the services, the Enigma long finished and something quieter taking its place, a line of pylons stepping away across the fields in time with the pulse of it, steady as a metronome, Gregory found the memory of a unique concert arriving the way it always did — sideways, uninvited, brought on by nothing he could point to, his foot never once leaving the accelerator, his own hands never once losing their place on the wheel even as the rest of him went somewhere else entirely.

It hadn't been a Last Night. A Tuesday, well into the season, one prom among seventy-odd that

summer, no flags, no fancy dress, nothing to mark it out on paper as anything other than an ordinary date in an ordinary week. Mozart's Fortieth, and then a new choral piece afterward, forty-five minutes long — and the whole thing performed, both works, entirely from memory. No scores on the stands. No music at all, anywhere on that platform, for the best part of an hour and a half.

Gregory had been in his usual place that night, as he was every night, and had watched it happen with something closer to disbelief than appreciation, at first. He had a memory like a sieve for almost everything else in his life — birthdays, names, where he'd left his glasses — and had spent most of his adult life faintly baffled by anyone who could hold more than a phone number in their head at once. And here were eighty-odd musicians holding an entire symphony, every entrance, every rest, every key change, without a single page between them, as though the notes had simply moved house from the paper into the body and

taken up permanent residence there.

With nothing to read, they had nowhere fixed to look, and Gregory had noticed, somewhere around the second movement, that they had started to move — not dramatically, nothing so crude as swaying for effect, but something closer to weather passing over a field, a shoulder leaning into a phrase here, a bow arm rising a fraction there, the whole body of strings tilting almost imperceptibly together on a long crescendo and then settling again, separately, each player finding their own small private motion the instant the phrase let them go. It put him in mind, absurdly, of a flock of starlings he'd once stood and watched from a car park at dusk, the whole shifting mass of them turning as one thing and then unravelling into a thousand separate birds and then gathering again, nobody leading, nobody following, the shape simply arriving out of everyone doing their own small part at once. He'd never seen an orchestra do that before, not so plainly. Give them a page to

stare at and they held themselves like soldiers. Take the page away, apparently, and something older and less disciplined took over instead — eighty people breathing the same shape into being, together and alone, exactly the way the sound they made always had been and he had simply never had the evidence in front of his own eyes until that night.

He'd thought about that far more than the performance itself, in the years since. Not the sound, though the sound had been extraordinary — something looser and more alive without the usual furniture of stands and pages between the players and the air. What stayed with him was the plain fact of it: that a human memory, treated properly, trained and trusted rather than doubted, could hold something that large and let it go, note by note, exactly when it was needed, with nothing written down anywhere to catch it if it failed.

He'd been aware, the whole time, in the particular way he was always aware of it, that Radio 3 was

carrying the whole thing out live as it happened — into cars, into kitchens, into at least one hospital corridor he'd once been told about by a nurse who'd been on nights and left it playing at the desk for the patients who couldn't sleep. Thousands of people, none of them able to see what he could see, all of them hearing the same silence where sheet music should have been, all of them, in their own separate rooms, briefly joined by the same faint, collective disbelief that any of this was actually happening without a single page in sight. He liked that almost as much as the concert itself. Somewhere out there, in this exact moment replayed now on a different stretch of motorway years later, somebody equally astonished had been standing at an ironing board, or driving this same road in the opposite direction, hearing precisely what he was hearing, for precisely the same reason.

He still couldn't have told you, if pressed, how a person managed to memorise forty-five minutes of new music written specifically for that single night,

never to be repeated in quite that form again. But he understood, better than most people probably could, what it meant to carry something that size around inside you for years without ever writing the important part down.

The music shifted again, something building now toward a close, and Gregory came back to himself the way he always did — not with a jolt, nothing so careless as that, just a gradual return, the fields resolving back into fields, the road back into road, his hands exactly where they had been the whole time, his speed exactly where it should be, as though he had never actually left at all, only opened a second window somewhere behind his eyes and glanced through it for a while.

He was close now. He could feel it in the traffic before he could have named a single landmark to prove it — the particular density of a city gathering itself around a motorway, brake lights bunching, the sky losing its openness to buildings — and he checked the time out of habit rather than anxiety,

because he already knew, the way he always knew, that it would come out close to exact.

He came off the motorway at the junction he always used, and the music had changed with the landscape without his ever quite noticing the join, the wide, unhurried lines of the countryside pieces giving way, somewhere around the outskirts, to something busier and more clipped, brass answering brass in short, urgent phrases that matched, almost exactly, the stop-start rhythm of the traffic itself — a bus pulling out, a cyclist threading between lanes, a set of lights holding him a moment longer than he'd have liked. He'd noticed this before, more times than he could count, and had long since stopped being surprised by it: the countryside seemed to prefer the long, patient pieces, the ones that could stretch themselves the length of a valley without hurrying, while the city always seemed to want something quicker, more interrupted, more like itself. He doubted it meant anything. He enjoyed it anyway,

every single time, the way the glass and brick sliding past his window seemed to keep almost perfect time with whatever Radio 3 had decided he should be hearing at that exact moment.

By the time the streets narrowed properly into central London, taxis and buses and a great deal of impatience pressing in from every side, the traffic had stopped moving altogether, and so, almost exactly, had the music — something slow and sustained had taken over on the radio, a single held chord stretching out over the strings while he sat entirely motionless behind a bus that showed no sign of going anywhere, and Gregory found the stillness outside and the stillness inside the piece lining up so precisely that he laughed, once, quietly, to himself, at a coincidence he'd long since stopped believing was really a coincidence at all.

The presenter's voice arrived between pieces, unhurried, naming what had just been played and what was still to come, and Gregory let it wash past him the way he let most presenters wash past

him, waiting instead for the only voice in his life that had ever actually mattered to this particular ritual: the last chord itself, arriving.

Then the streets he could have driven with his eyes shut, past a Victorian terrace and a stretch of newer flats and then, finally, the familiar turning onto the college campus — a handful of permit spaces tucked away behind one of the science buildings, half a mile of pavement between here and where he was actually going, a walk he'd done so many thousands of times he no longer noticed doing it at all.

He pulled in, cut the wheel, brought the car to rest in the space that had unofficially been his since his very first week, and the final phrase of the broadcast resolved itself in the same instant his hand found the key.

Engine off. Radio off. Both at once, exactly as intended, the silence afterward every bit as complete and satisfying as it always was.

He sat for a moment in it, the way he always did, before reaching for the door handle.

Then Gregory — thirteen at heart in all the ways that mattered, a man who had spent a lifetime being taken for simply one more devoted face in a crowd of devoted faces, and who had never once felt the need to correct anybody — got out of the car, walked past the loading bay and in through the plain staff door, badge already in hand, and went down to the arena floor — to the long console set among the standing crowd, no barrier around it worth the name, close enough that people leaned past his shoulder all evening to get a better view, close enough that he could look up and out across every tier in the building without moving his feet — and stood at it, as he had stood at it every single night the Proms were broadcast for the better part of thirty years, to decide exactly what several thousand strangers standing in the dark around him, and several hundred thousand more listening at home, were about to hear.

He had never once sat down to do it. There was no chair. There had never been a chair, and he had never asked for one, and it had taken him years to admit to himself why: because everybody else in that part of the room was standing, and had paid for the privilege, and it had seemed to him from the very first night — still seemed to him — that the only honest way to be among them was to be among them.

It was, he had realised at some point and never mentioned to anybody, within about twenty feet of the patch of floor he had claimed for himself as a young man on his very first night, before he had the faintest idea he would ever be paid to stand there.

Nobody would have called what he did romantic. Levels, balance, the placement of a dozen microphones around a platform that was laid out differently every single night, the constant small correction of a hall that had never, in a century and a half, quite learned to behave itself acoustically.

But it was, as far as Gregory had ever been able to tell anyone who asked, the truest possible way he had found of belonging to the thing he loved — not simply present for it, not simply moved by it, but responsible, in the most literal sense, for how it reached everyone else.

Before he did anything else he looked up, the way he always looked up, and took them all in: the microphones. Dozens of them, most of them invisible unless you knew to hunt for them — slim and dark and hung on wires from the gallery, clipped discreetly to the rail, standing on thin booms above the platform, angled into corners of a room that had spent a century and a half refusing to make anybody's job easy.

He had put a good many of them where they were. Not all at once, and not from any diagram — one at a time, over years, moved a foot to the left one season and left there the next because it had turned out to be right. And a few of them, though nobody would ever have guessed it to look at them, were

hanging in almost exactly the places where, one summer, a hand had gone up above a crowd three tiers away and waved at him, and a message had arrived in his pocket a moment later saying that from here, honestly, it was perfect.

He had believed them. He had gone and hung a microphone there. Those were the ones the whole country would be listening through tonight.

All around him, close enough to touch, the hall was filling. Somewhere further out still, in cars very like his own, on roads very like the one he'd just left, people he would never meet were turning their own radios up half a notch without quite deciding to, and Gregory, standing at his console in the middle of a crowd that had no particular reason to notice him, felt the old, familiar, thirteen-year-old certainty settle over him one more time.

Not one of them would ever know he was there. He had simply made sure, every night for decades, that wherever they were listening, they could hear it

properly.

THE END

W Huxley Oakham writes short fiction about the quiet architecture of ordinary households — and, on this occasion, a dozen microphones hung exactly where a stranger once said the sound was perfect.

About this story

“Radio 3” is one of five stories in Talisman, a short story collection by W Huxley Oakham exploring the quiet architecture of ordinary households.

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