

The Whine in the Wires

The 1930's being the explosion of radio meant everyone was clamouring to be a voice heard by all and possibly remembered for all time. Most radio outfits were well-lit, corporate-funded, and echoing with celebrities and energy. But in the dingy, airless basement of WGAT, dust swirled lazily in the dim glow of vacuum tubes, and a lonely, jittery bulb was swinging mysteriously from a frayed cord. The rinky-dink, one-man operation of Morty Moss was barely scraping by. There was not even a single seedy local business willing to put their name on the line for Moss, and for good reason.

Moss hunched over the microphone, his beefy frame taxing the rickety lease-to-own chair. His sausage fingers fiddled with the console's dials; his voice – a gravelly growl sharpened by years of “giving folks the razz” – blared through the ether.

“You call that a *screed*, you sap? Some *yokel* bellyachin' about his crops going bust? Cry me a river, pal; maybe if you weren't such a *wet smack*, the dirt'd take a shine to ya!”

The transmitter wheezed, flinging his venom into the parlors of a few hapless late-nighters across the Midwest. Moss grinned, his triple chin jiggling, loving the notion of people having no choice but to listen to the only show on at that hour.

In the past, Moss had been a minor player in the vaudeville scene – a low-tier rogue who would taunt the audience until they were either so drunk they mindlessly danced along, or hurled their drinks at him. The footlights faded when the gigs dried up, but he felt that the airwaves offered him a fresh opportunity. Now he was “Morty the Mouth,” the undisputed kingpin of *Midnight Madness*, a call-in lark where he'd hand out the cold, hard truth to any fool who dared to dial in.

He'd often call his favorites back weeks and even months later for further torment, and mock them endlessly, going so far as to invent entire stories about their supposed lives based on the little information he squeezed from them. Occasionally, he'd promise money from sympathetic listeners in order to bait those who were down on their luck, or trying to start a business in trying times. It happened, but more often than not, the listeners were sending him grubby, wrinkled checks simply to hear him be unabashedly rude.

Those listeners – some square, some screwy – lapped it up, dialing in at 1 a.m. to hear him chew out both the downtrodden and idiotic alike. He played it off with an “I'm just givin' 'em the razz” – a lousy dodge for the odd legal beef – but Moss didn't care. As far as he was concerned, he was the *big cheese* of the airwaves, slinging mud like it was nickels at a dime-a-dance joint.

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Home was a different story – a *broken* home if ever there was one. Junie, his wife, was confined to their weary brownstone, her fragile heart battling the relentless grip of tuberculosis, each cough reverberating through the walls.

The children – Walter, aged eleven, and Nellie, just eight – darted about like frightened rabbits, evading their father's shouts. To them, Moss was not a radio personality; he was

merely a scoundrel in a greasy, sweat-soaked undershirt—a petty tyrant who would sooner unleash chaos upon their world than buy Junie's medicine or spare Walter a beating for his supposed clumsiness. They eked out a meager existence on Junie's paltry savings and the scant earnings Moss brought in from WGAT, most of which vanished into cheap liquor, cigars, other more questionable substances, and a gaudy pawnshop hat to bolster his waning swagger.

Tonight, as usual, the house lay still save for the rasping heavings of Junie. Walter sat by her bedside, a damp rag pressed against his mother's forehead, his adolescent hands trembling like leaves in a restless breeze.

“He’s at it again, Ma,” he sighed, his voice heavy with an unsettling dread. Little Nellie, who spent most of her time being as quiet as possible, peered cautiously from the shadows of the hall, clutching a rag doll that had seen better days, its missing arm a testament to her owner's need- and parental neglect. Nellie's wide eyes, round and glistening, filled with a mix of curiosity and trepidation. They'd stopped pleading with Morty for help long ago—after the last fight, when he sent Walter sprawling with a punch that left a nice purple shiner for days.

Nellie had met Morty during her better days and been dazzled by his stage presence. Her devout faith in an inherent good of human nature, combined with the star-struck memories of her youth, were all that kept her optimistic about her husband. She was constantly making excuses for him to her questioning children, and could only hope that the trials they went through would make them more resilient adults.

Morty often quizzed his wife and children about the previous night's show, and his fury was unmatched if he discovered his family hadn't listened. Needing to wake up for school the next day didn't matter to him, since Morty didn't care about his children's education. “I stopped school in the fifth grade, you don't need nothin' after that but street smarts,” he often bragged through tobacco-stained teeth.

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In the dim light of the studio, Moss was dishing out some sharp retorts to the caller—a courageous but misguided soul who dared to suggest he should take it easy. “Ease off? You lily-livered sap, I’d give you the old one-two if you showed your mug here!” Feeling righteous, he struck the desk with a heavy hand, sending a tremor through the cluttered surface.

Before Moss could continue, a noise distracted him. His listeners didn’t catch the faint whine that snuck into his headset then—a high, scraping pitch like a buzzsaw hitting a nail. Moss recoiled, tearing the earpiece away and rubbing his balding head. “Lousy gear,” he complained, cursing the station’s stinginess. WGAT struggled under the weight of a meager budget, no thanks to its infamous nighttime host. Its transmitter barely managed to stretch its feeble signal to the city line most of the time.

The whine dissipated softly, and he thrust the headset back on, ready to dive into the caller once more. Yet the noise returned again, wailing and weaving through the background static like a blade. He narrowed his eyes at the console, fiddling with its knobs, but the slight cacophony persisted.

"What's the gag, huh?" he muttered, his bravado slipping away into annoyance. The signal needle danced erratically, as if possessed by an unseen force, even though no new call had come through. He leaned into the microphone, forcing a hollow laugh. "Hey, quit pulling my leg. I ain't mellowin' over no static!"

It was increasingly evident that the phenomenon was anything *but* static. The *whine* grew louder, a chilling sound that set his nerves on edge for reasons he couldn't quite grasp. Suddenly from the corner of his eye, he thought he noticed a shadow that flitted across the yellowed, peeling wallpaper. Moss whirled around in his chair, hoping that perhaps Richie, the nighttime technician, was walking in, perhaps with a monkey wrench in hand.

Nobody was there.

Silence and stillness enveloped the smoky room, broken only by a chaotic jumble of papers that suddenly fell, while the dim red light of the "ON AIR" sign pulsed softly in the shadows. Moss swung back to face the console once again, heart thumping. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was conscious of the fact that dead air was the worst thing a radio host could broadcast, but the *whine* spiked again. Now it carried a mumble—high and garbled, like a gossip group of women whispering.

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Back at home, Junie stirred, an unsettling chill creeping up her spine. "Walter," she rasped, "run down to the station, see if your father's alright." Walter stood still, uneasy but with a glimmer of hope that perhaps, just perhaps, something would finally silence the nasty old buzzard. Walter would do anything for his poor mother though, so he finally ran swiftly out the door and down the street toward the station where his father was all alone and mysteriously silent, as he had many other nights when the old man had been too drunk to know the way home. Nellie obediently shut the door behind her older brother, then returned to her mother, her doll dragging across the dusty, uneven floorboards with a soft, eerie *swipe*.

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In the studio, the shadow returned, now deeper and darker, stretching across the wall like liquid roots. Moss's heart pounded fiercely, yet he masked it with a fierce snarl. "Who's that? Richie, you old geezer, I'll tan your hide!" He again pounded the console with frustration. For some reason, he felt like the *whining* shadow was mocking him by not speaking.

It began to twist and contort itself. Moss rubbed his eyes as he watched it forming a tall, gaunt figure, limbs jutting at right angles, its head scraping the oppressive ceiling above. If he didn't know better, he would have thought several antennae had joined together and come to life.

The *whine* bubbled into an onslaught of voices clamoring over one another—every fool he'd teased, every woman he'd japed, every hopeless soul he'd knocked down for a laugh. They slithered through the headset, gnawing at his mind: "*Snitch... pansy... quiff...*"

Moss ripped the headset from his head and hurled it across the room, an explosion of frustration awakening within him. "Shaddup!" He exclaimed, trying not to believe he was hearing what he was, in concrete fact, hearing.

In spite of these desperate actions, the mumbling voices surrounding the *whine* continued to pour out of the speakers, now filling the gloomy little space. His mouth dropped open as the impossible shadow peeled off the wall, tangible as a slug, with a featureless visage now; a gaping void of darkness. The elongated, gnarled fingers of the shadow quivered in an unfelt wind, and oozed a viscous, black substance that sizzled upon contact with the smudged linoleum floor.

Moss pushed himself back too hard and too fast, the chair slid from underneath him and his weight crashed down onto the floor with a wet thud. “W-what kind of spook are you?!” he blurted, his voice trembling.

The creature itself merely continued the shrill *whine*. It drew near with an unsettling, erratic movement, and the solitary bulb on its fraying wire began to flicker uncontrollably. Moss seized a bottle of hooch from under the desk, his movements swift and reckless, and sent the bottle hurtling through the air. It missed the creature entirely and shattered against the wall.

The sharp stench of the alcohol burned through the air and the wallpaper. The mumbling voices erupted in a disharmony of high, guttural laughter, as the pointed shadow loomed overhead, its quivering claws extending menacingly toward him.

The studio suddenly vanished. Moss found himself in a vast, dark and icy expanse, the atmosphere thick with the sweet odor of rot and decay – putrid remnants of food and roadkill, with notes of singed strands of hair, and a flowering noxious scent reminiscent of scorched rubber.

Slowly, his various victims appeared, a multitude of faces contorted with despair and insanity. Hunger had hollowed a farmer's eyes, leaving them sunken and vacant. A widow, her face a canvas of sorrow, clutched a foreclosure slip in bony fingers. A boy, whom he had mocked for his stammer, stood trembling in an unrelenting galestorm. The crowd gazed – silent yet overbearing – their presence crushing down painfully upon his rapidly withering heart.

“You ain’t wise to entertainment,” Moss gasped defiantly, collapsing to his flaccid knees. “It’s a *show*, see? My listeners eat it up! I’m just dishing out what they crave!” The faces remained steadfast through the ever-present *whine* that was now ear-splitting, and the ground beneath him erupted, a jagged maw gaping wide as it spilled into an abyss. Wiry hands – countless, dark and grasping – shot up, raking like talons, as they pierced through his flabby legs to seize him.

He shrieked, but nothing could be louder now than the *whine*. His fat, flapping arms thrashed wildly as the metallic, cold black hands dragged him into the abyss; the mumbling voices echoed with a feral intensity, reminiscent of a wounded, yet rabid, pack of wolves.

Within the confines of the studio, reality reasserted itself with a jarring clarity. Moss lay helpless on the floor like a beached whale, grasping at the unseen, his eyes wide with a frantic, unfocused terror. The console crackled with energy, the transmitter howled in protest, and ominous letters slithered across the dials – slow, sinister: “R... A... Z... Z...” They expanded – R A Z Z – until they distorted the glass, the piercing *whine* reverberating through the walls.

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Walter entered the station through the back door, the only way into the dank basement that had once been merely a storm cellar. Each step down seemed to echo with a sense of dread, though Walter was strangely calm. Peering in through the glass in the door, Walter was nevertheless shocked by the state of his father's workplace.

The place was a frenzy – wires writhing like serpents, the bulb somehow sputtering sparks, and Moss thrashing about, his mouth agape yet soundless. The shadow had slipped away, but its lingering malevolence clung to the air, holding Moss captive in a paralyzing grip.

“Pop?” Walter's voice cut through the air, a mere whisper swallowed by the relentless *whine*. Moss's head snapped in his direction, eyes red but empty, and smiled wide. “*Razz*,” he rasped, his voice heavy and laden with the weight of the cursed.

He staggered to his feet, unsteady, and launched himself toward his son.

Walter recoiled, his heart racing as he seized the nearest thing he could: the jagged remnants of a shattered mic stand.

Surprising himself, he swung and struck a decisive blow against Moss's skull. Blood oozed, yet Moss pressed on – the dials screamed “*RAZZ*,” a grotesque symphony of dripping static decay.

Moss chuckled mindlessly, a gurgling sound escaping his fleshy lips, his swollen hands grasping at the air. Walter swung twice, then thrice, with relentless fury, his shouts echoing in the chaos, unaware of the volume of his voice. Moss finally crumpled, a brief twitch betraying his struggle before he went rigid, and finally, thankfully, limp.

The machinery groaned ominously, shadows enveloped the space like a shroud, and the atmosphere was suffused with an unsettling dread.

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The next night, the transmitter sprang to life. Static crackled, then the *whine* again pierced through, sharp and relentless, pulling Moss's voice – slow and deliberate: “*Just... giving... razz...*” The dials pulsed with an eerie luminescence, “*RAZZ*” expanding unnervingly, while a shadow flickered within the wires, leaning in to unleash a charged cackle.

At home, Junie wept quietly while the children clustered together, the menacing presence of a nightmare lurking in the airwaves.