



2005

## The Stereo

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### Recommended Citation

Colas, Brandon (2005) "The Stereo," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 8 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol8/iss1/2>

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## Keywords

Fiction

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# The Stereo

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by Brandon Colas

“...it is clear that such persons as the writer of these notes not only may, but positively must, exist in our society, when we consider the circumstances in the midst of which our society is formed.”

—Fyodor Dostoyevsky,  
*Notes from the Underground*, Part I

They wouldn't listen when I explained that their stereo was too loud and that they needed to do something about it. Nothing changed; my first persuasive attempt was futile, a fistful of sand hurled into the wind. *Make no mistake*, I had stated, reading from a speech scribbled on a napkin with a black felt-tipped marker, *we are sincere in our request that the volume of your stereo be lowered for purposes of our quality-of-life, as implied in our Constitution*. They lived in the apartment above ours and we often heard their stereo. Early in the morning or late at the night polka music blatted through our ceiling tiles as they performed their obscure Slavic folk dance, stomping their feet at irregular intervals, shrilling on penny whistles, and yelling in Slovenian “*Še en pesem!*”<sup>1</sup>

When I suggested to them that perhaps their dances would best be done during waking hours—convenient to the rest of the building—they acted confused, and then I exclaimed in perfectly

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<sup>1</sup> Which, when translated, means, “Another song!”

good Dutch, *U moet beleefd zijn! Dans niet zo vaak!*<sup>2</sup> and in an effort at symbolism I crumpled the napkin and shook my fist at their stereo, a monster of plastic and shining aluminum and wires and technology, looming in the back corner of their living room. Expressing my thoughts so dramatically may have been a bit overwrought,<sup>3</sup> or even indelicate, yet I believe that my words were apt, considering the circumstances. After this failed, eloquent speech, my partner and I decided that we were, *de facto*, at war with our Ukrainian neighbors.<sup>4 5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Which, when translated, means, “You must be polite! Do not dance so often!”

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, they had looked at me with confusion-clouded eyes.

<sup>4</sup> At this point in my narrative it is important to note that previous to my speech in which I used all the Dutch I could muster from my childhood memories of our maid Anna, I had written the Ukrainians a letter, transcribed here:

To Whom It May Concern:

We (living in Apartment 131 of the Hausenberg Apartment Complex, located on 247 Dillfield Lane in the town of Whiting, Connecticut, United States of America, Earth) live below your apartment. After much discussion, we have decided to send you this letter in hopes that you will soon turn down your stereo because it is in fact much too loud for us; when we hear it blasting it has a negative effect on our cookery and our cat’s gestation periods. [N.B.: At this point we did not actually have cats. However, both my partner and I agreed that if we did have cats, suffering through polka music at all hours of the morning would be detrimental to all areas of their health, including their (potential) gestation periods] In short, if your stereo does not get lowered in volume, and soon at that, you may expect legal action, and possibly a lawsuit, and soon at that.

With love,  
Steven and Cathy<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> It should also be observed that “Steve and Cathy” are not our real names, but we feared what would happen if we gave the polka fanatics our names. The above letter was a noble—and, like my speech, ultimately doomed—attempt at reconciling with the Ukrainians. And their response was overwhelmingly negative; they deemed it unnecessary to reply to our letter.

Now, there seemed little we could do to fight against them. My partner suggested that we set a trap outside their door so that when one or another or the other of them walked out they would walk right into the trap and get caught, and we would set them free eventually, of course, but let 'em sweat it out for awhile so they would learn their lesson and show simple courtesies at night, and when I asked my partner how she would set up the trap, and with what, she became reticent, and finally muttered something about a cage, flashbulb, and fishing pole, making little sense to me, but then again people say what makes sense to them. Springing off the trap idea, I suggested that we place a tripwire in front of their door, made perhaps of some yellow yarn, of which we have yards and yards because Karen<sup>6</sup> thought she would make sweaters for everyone on our Christmas list nine years ago, a project doomed to failure after she had completed one for William Fredrick Nietzsche Palavar the Third (my nephew who, when I was last visited, told me that the moon was made of cheese and bit my thumb, and although I complained to my sister, she told me that William was fourteen now and old enough to make his own choices). My partner agreed to my clever idea and that very night we placed one thread of string in front of the Ukrainians' doorway, and we waited a few days for a thunk, implying that someone fell, but nothing happened, nothing at all, and then Karen suggested that perhaps we needed to suspend the yarn in order for them to trip over it, and I realized that she had a legitimate suggestion, but it was too late by then because when we went upstairs to reset the tripwire, it was gone. No doubt the Ukrainians stole it.

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<sup>5</sup> This *apparent* assumption of ethnicity begs the question, *were they in fact Ukrainian? And if they were, why would you attempt to speak to them in Dutch? And why would they utilize expressions in Slovenian if they were from the Ukraine?* To such a ridiculous series of questions, I need make no reply: your own foolish words are reply enough.

<sup>6</sup> Not her real name, in fact.

The first battle had been lost. And this was a discouraging setback for both of us, but finally Karen said perhaps we ought to try blasting some music back at them, and I thought this a stellar idea, absolutely top-notch, so that day I bought a karaoke machine—a hefty aerugo-colored cube with a television screen implanted in the top that smelled not unlike a new car—along with cassette after cassette of karaoke music, bands with names like The Gadflies and Jefferson Blairplane and Glowing Special, but we didn't know any of the words for any of music from any of the bands, a disturbing fact we discovered after the Gadflies "Take Me Out" came on, and this was an upsetting moment. Karen and I stood on the red shag carpet of our living room, rocking a little on our feet, trying not to make eye contact with each other and looking at the wall instead where a landscape portrait of peasants<sup>7</sup> in a gilt frame was hanging, an artistic gem Karen had discovered it at a garage sale, last autumn. My face began to match the color of the carpet, and then suddenly, out of sheer rage, I flipped on the microphone and roared, "PERHAPS WE WON'T SING BUT SHALL MERELY YELL AT YOU: AND YOU SHALL HEAR THE ERROR OF YOUR WAYS AND REPENT AND REFUSE THE TEMPTATION TO PLAY SUCH FOUL MUSIC AT SUCH FOUL HOURS IN THE MORNING IN SUCH FOUL WEATHER IN SUCH A FOUL APARTMENT!" and my partner applauded at this inspired, spontaneous speech. What afflatus inspired such pungent precise words I know not. Yet the cold fact remains that nothing changed in our relationship with the Ukrainians. And make no mistake, I made this speech and ones similar to it each hour, on the hour, for two full days. I'm certain that the

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<sup>7</sup> They were standing about in a field of white wheat, doing nothing, and you could tell that the expression on their faces was just irritatingly beatific. They weren't working or anything, just mucking about like a flock of sheep. Stupid peasants!

Ukrainians heard me but simply ignored my warnings, hoping we would give up before they did.<sup>8</sup>

The dual failures of the karaoke machine and the tripwire yarn would have been enough to break almost anyone's heart, but my partner and I knew better than to become downtrodden, because if we showed patient fortitude we could persevere and prove . . . prove what, exactly? Now that I look back on those fateful days, so challenging and yet so richly rewarding, I must ask myself what exactly did we learn from our conflicts? How did we change and in fact develop not as mere story book characters but as people? In short, *what did we want to prove? And why did we want to prove it?* Such a question leads me to reply: *that we could not only stand up for our rights but show that there are choices in how we live our lives and that we can in fact—great Zeus! What am I saying? We wanted sleep, and peace, and rest, and thought that was not too much to ask for our lot in life. We wanted to prove we would struggle to win those necessities if need be;*

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<sup>8</sup> They were somewhat correct about this: the landlord came and confiscated our karaoke machine at the end of the second day because, according to him, the neighbors in 129 and 133 both complained, on numerous occasions, about the noise from our apartment, and when we told him, "Let he that is without sin cast the first stone," he stared at us as if we were the crazy ones, as if the Ukrainians were right in what they did, what with their cultural traditions of playing polka music with its perky beats through an otherwise peaceful apartment complex at 3:30 in the morning; and when we suggested to him that it might be outside of his bounds to take something of ours he said that if we knew what was good for us we would go along with him because he had been thinking of booting us out since we were behind on rent, and we had to admit this true, although I believe that we'll get caught up one of these days. Besides, as we implied in our initial statement to him, we don't claim to be perfect, but some common courtesies ought to be respected and lived by, etcetera, etcetera. And at this point he left, carrying the karaoke machine under his left arm, limping from the war wound he had received twenty-seven years previous to becoming landlord of the Hausenberg Apartment Complex.

we wanted to prove that we could—and would—earn what we needed not merely because of comfort, but because we were human, and that’s what makes life beautiful. Etcetera.

After several late-night discussions at a local coffee shop, Koffe Incorporated, my partner and I agreed that perhaps that problem we were facing was the fact that we were not dealing with the problem and were fighting tangentials; to use a notorious cliché, we were dealing with effects rather than the cause; or another, we were dealing with symptoms rather than the illness; or another, we were dealing with molehills rather than the mountain. I can distinctly remember my partner gazing into my azure eyes, and saying, “But Peter,<sup>9</sup> what does all this mean? You speak so eloquently, and yet, Peter, snuggle-bear,<sup>10</sup> what are we going to do about *them*?” And I had nothing with which to reply. I slowly stirred my cappuccino, topped by whipped cream and smidgens of chocolate.

And then—like a bolt of lightning, one might say—the idea zapped through my brain.

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<sup>9</sup> Not my real name, in fact.

<sup>10</sup> A pet name. Ah, how I miss her! And her simple ways! We met in Koffe Incorporated when I was a graduate student, studying behavioral psychology, and she was a lonely college freshman, with neither a major nor a job to pay rent on her ramshackle house. I was sitting at the table nearest the counter, with books strewn about me, and she was working at the counter, and then she came up to me, wearing her blue-and-yellow-striped polo shirt that looked so good with her curly cocoa hair that matched the tables carefully crafted of acacia wood, and she said in a soft voice, “Sir, what do you want?” Baffled by her beauty, I had to simply reply, “I don’t know, miss. But . . .” and then she looked at me with her inviting eyes in her warm face and I swallowed and said, “But I think I’d like you, if you’d have me.” And we’ve been together ever since, for the past fifteen years and have talked a few times about marriage but haven’t got there quite yet, and then this incident with the Ukrainians happened and heaven knows that’s thrown our lives, or what’s left of them off-kilter for a good while.

I gave a truly short speech,<sup>11</sup> finished the rest of my cappuccino, topped by whipped cream and smidgens of chocolate, with gusto, and we rushed back to the apartment, hand in hand. Inside, we changed into black socks, black sneakers, black sweatpants, black sweatshirts, and brown leather gloves. I took our hefty Maglight<sup>12</sup> out of its closet. We were prepared.

Appropriately, it began to rain outside. Not a fine summer mist that softens the temperature; no, this rain drummed and thumped off roads and roofs, echoing off ceilings and cars, misting the ground because it slammed the sidewalk with such force. And yet, crashing its way over the roaring rain, I heard the initial chords of the Vanek Czech Band's "Poutnik's Nahoda"<sup>13</sup> Polka." *TONIGHT*, I thought to myself, *TONIGHT this insanity will stop!* "Now, Karen!" I shrieked, "The hour is arrived! Our moment of revenge has risen on the eastern horizon!" Carried away by the force of my rhetoric, Karen grabbed a broom and began to bang against the ceiling to irritate the Ukrainians as I ran out our door, down the narrow hallway and outside into the buckets and barrels and drums of rain to the power pole beside our window, and running to the base of the portentous wooden structure, I began to climb, Maglight<sup>14</sup> gripped between my teeth. It tasted metallic, the way your hands smell after sorting a stack of pennies, or, simply, the flavor of a large flashlight. "My dearest!" cried Karen. "Do be careful!" She had stopped banging on the ceiling, because she was convinced that, in a moment of confusion, the Ukrainians had paused their music. Her words inspired me to continue climbing, wet peg after wet peg.

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<sup>11</sup> "Dearest, we're going to stop them once and for all, and if you come back to the apartment with me, within a half-hour we will have ruined their polka-playing plot."

<sup>12</sup> ®

<sup>13</sup> That is, Wanderer's Luck.

<sup>14</sup> See note 12.

When I was nearly three-quarters of the way to the top, overconfident of my success,<sup>15</sup> I shouted to her, “Be not afraid!” and at that point the Maglight<sup>16</sup> dropped from my mouth, a silver stream of saliva coating its handle, and it fell down, down down down, falling faster and faster faster faster, *right at the exact spot where Karen was standing*. I looked, but couldn’t see anything. “Karen!” I screamed, voice muffled by the splattering drops of rain that had soaked through my clothes. “Karen! Noooooooooooooooooo!”

How hard it is for me to tell all this. And yet, now is not the time to quit in my narrative. In retrospect, I can see that then surely was not the time for me to quit in my expedition: would a war stop for the death of a soldier? Would a religion halt for the sake of a martyr? But still, I hesitated. With warmwet tears streaking the side of my face and being washed off by the rain, I began to curse the day of my birth.<sup>17</sup> The enormous humming and fizzing power box squatted above my head, wires jutting out of it like arteries and veins connected to a perverse mechanical heart. It was only four pegs away, but it may as well have been four light-years away.

*What would Karen do?* I asked myself. And instantly, I realized that she would want me to go on. I steadied my grip and clambered up the last four pegs. Yet a foul miasma clung to the sinister box, and indeed I believe that box this could affect thought patterns. For with the end in reach, the full implications of my plan ravaged my body. What would life be like without electricity? How would we—and not just Karen and I, assuming that she had survived the flashlight’s fall, but all of us who lived in the Hausenberg Apartment Complex—manage to live

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<sup>15</sup> A sad example of *hubris*, that is, overwhelming pride.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. above note 14.

<sup>17</sup> I can distinctly remember asking, for the first time, such time-honored questions as “Why oh why oh why did I deserve to live and what could Karen have done to deserve getting death from a Maglight from heaven?”

without working refrigerators, or televisions, or lights or alarm clocks or radios or vacuums? The hamburger meat would rapidly rot! Our three Persian rugs would become filthy! We would never be on time for work and would likely lose our jobs and Social Security benefits! And this was the most difficult moment of my quest. Devising the plan had been a challenge, and Karen's possible death<sup>18</sup> a certain setback, but this psychological battle fought in the confines of my mind . . . this was the true test of my mettle.

But then the rain slowed, and I could hear him—Vanek himself, curse him! He was singing—more like screeching, actually—and the accordion tired to keep up with his profoundly awful Eastern European voice.<sup>19</sup> A penny whistle shrieked like an enraged bat. Seized with fury, I bellowed, “If we perish, we perish!”<sup>20</sup> and with that heroic epithet, I grabbed the thick slick chord that dangled in front of my eyes, and yanked, and then I heard a crackling and it felt like my body was disconnected from my mind, like I was floating soaring sailing and suddenly I could perceive things; and the first realization that came to mind was the fact that the rain drops were stationary and our whole liquid world was splashing through them and being re-formed each instant; and I realized that I was seeing in *fact*, and I understood that we are centers of the universe, that

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<sup>18</sup> And. Well. She died, a few days later. But somehow, still, she didn't exactly. Because by then I'd figured out that, well, that it didn't matter, really. None of that did.

<sup>19</sup> He sang the following bizarre lyrics, which I translated from the Slovenian:

“Although you<sup>b</sup> may think you like me  
I tell you you do not:  
For even had you loved me,  
Me never would you have had.”

<sup>b</sup> The “you” is plural throughout the song.

<sup>20</sup> From here onward, I cease from all footnotes in an effort to improve narrative pace.

the medieval scholastics—*mirabile visu*—were as right as they deigned themselves to be and that even cabbalists spoke truly, for nothing happens without our involvement, without perception no event can occur; and somehow we together are parts of the same whole, in life, the universe, and everything; and a white speck grew in the center of my eye, greater and greater, until my eyes were blindingly bathed in white light; and I realized my eyes were closing, and I fought to keep them open to keep seeing and reseeing and shaping and reshaping the incredible full beautiful rich world around us, and the weight of my eyelids became more and more heavy and first one began to drop and then the other and suddenly they were shut and I saw nothing; and then in the dark in front of me stood an ancient white-bearded man with burning blue eyes, holding a quill in his right hand and a sheaf of illustrated papers in his left, and he frowned and then his writing implements vanished and a rusted green accordion appeared in his hands and his blue eyes turned fiery red and the left one developed a tic and he started to wheeze out a tune and I tried to scream, “William! No! What have they done to you!” but I couldn’t—as if my voice were clogged—and all that came from my vocal cords was a squeal of terror like a choking pig and then he bellowed in a porcine voice:

“AND I MADE A RURAL PEN  
AND I STAIN'D THE WATER CLEAR,  
AND I WROTE MY HAPPY SONGS  
EVERY CHILD MAY JOY TO HEAR.”

And it was then that I finally understood the meaning of his song—of their song—for every thing that lives is Holy.