

This is a Dickie Lee Song

by **Maria Trombetta**

Dammit, Dickie Lee, you were supposed to live forever. You always said to me, “No way, uhn uhn, not me. I’m never gonna die. I’m gonna live forever. I’m stayin alive, like John Travolta. Stayin aliiiiive, iiiiiiv—ah!”

He used to say he was born in the Sonoma State Hospital on March 6th, 1948. I can’t find any records of anyone being born there, no doubt his parents brought him there when he was a baby, less than two years old, after they realized he was blind. Albert says that Dickie Lee was on the little kid unit with him, Baine Cottage. When I met Dickie Lee he asked me my name, date of birth and place of birth. Vital facts that he stored in his mind for years. The fever that made him lose his eyesight may have pushed another part of his brain into overdrive, because he had a thing for dates and for music, an incredible memory bank that held lyrics and birthdays. He could tell anyone what day their birthday was going to fall on this year and next year. When I saw him in last April, he told me that in 2015, my birthday would be on a Friday.

“Your name is Maria Trombetta and you were born on January 30th in Santa Rosa, right? You are married to Jonathan Palmer and his birthday is September 9th and he was born in Baltimore. Is his sister still Diane Bowcher and her birthday is March 31st?”

The first time I saw him at the Neighborhood House day program, he was sitting scrunched up in a corner next to a CD player, grumbling about having to listen to the Beach Boys over and over again. His head was folded down to his chest and his arms were wrapped protectively over his red lunch bag that hung from a black strap around his neck. He was small, slight, with dark short hair. I

was stationed on a chair in the hallway, doing my “observation”—a week long training that consisted of sitting and watching what was going on, watching the dramas of thirty-five unique lives play out on a six-hour stage. Dickie Lee was in the art room, the room designated for quieter work, which also seemed to hold the people who were able to retreat out of the main room’s chaos without drawing attention from the staff. So most of these folks were either napping or doing mosaics with dried beans and glitter glue. Once in a while, usually on their way to take someone else to the bathroom, a staff person would pop in to the art room and press play on the CD player. I don’t know how long the Beach Boys were in there before I started my “observation” but it was on repeat for two days at least before Dickie Lee freaked out. The Boss was taking him upstairs to the van, arms linked together to guide him, when he turned his face up towards hers and let her have it.

“I don’t wanna listen to the same goddam songs over and over! I’m gonna blow this place up! I’m gonna blow all you up!” He pulled away from her, elbows out and free and stretched himself taller.

“I’m going to blow it up!”

The Boss hustled him into the elevator, promising new music tomorrow in a syrupy voice. I heard her start humming a song and by the time they reached the lobby Dickie Lee was singing, “Sitting on the dock of the bay, wasting time ...” with gusto.

I made a mental note to change the CD every hour. At the end of the week I was allowed to go in the art room. Dickie Lee refused to move out of his chair, but while I was painting with Albert or helping Monica with her magazines, we would sing with each other. Mostly Beatles at first, because those songs I knew well. Then after a few months, we branched out to Creedence and the Rolling Stones and by then he would stand up and paint with me.



Do you remember when we went on the summer trip to Santa Cruz and I convinced you to ride on the Merry-Go-Round? You got stuck getting off the horse and kept shouting that your leg was going to break? I had to lift you up in the air and wiggle you off the horse and heave you over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes. You said I saved your life.

The doctors say cancer has spread to his brain and he has maybe two months, maybe less. I have to go see him. I don't want to go. He is receiving hospice care at his group home. My impression of group homes is that they are one step up from nursing homes, with plastic covers on the furniture and a lingering smell of pee. I don't want to see him hurting and angry and belligerent. I don't want to see him dying the way I saw Bill dying in SF General, shriveling up in the bed, or Albert, lost in his own mind and furious at everyone in the world. I dread calling his home. But when the phone rings, a really nice woman answers. She says yes, of course I can come visit and is this Maria Trombetta? I answer her, sounding I'm sure, confused.

“He talks about you all the time. My name is Maria too. He always says to me, ‘But you're not Maria Trombetta’.”

I cry when she hangs up. Even after I've been gone for five years, you must talk about me the way I talk about you. Telling small legends of our lives to other people.

When I introduce myself, people either forget my name instantly or start singing one of the songs associated with it. “Maria” from *West Side Story* is the most common for men between the ages of fifty and seventy, “Ave Maria” for the

older folks who fancy that they can really sing, “Take a Letter, Maria” by a few obnoxious people, once the Blondie song by a slightly blitzed bartender, but the most common and horrible, from *The Sound of Music*, “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?”.

This song was my sister’s weapon of choice for many years. She was clever with her forms of torture and as siblings do, knew what drove me to tears. The brown plastic Fisher Price record player placed just above my head on the dresser. She held the record like a trophy out in front of her, just out of my reach. One, two, three waltzing twirls around our bedroom she spun, pretending she was Julie Andrews on the mountaintop. Green shag carpet tickling my feet as I jumped for it, trying to swat it away from her.

“Nooo!” I wailed.

Laughter. Evil sibling laughter.

And as a child, I didn’t know that the nuns in the movie were worried about her free-spiritedness, or really why the nuns would care. All I heard was a nasty, mocking voice telling me that I was flighty and stupid and a big pain in the ass. When people sing it to me now, I have to stand there with a forced smile on my face and wait until they get through four or five lines before they forget the rest of it. Then they finish and I am still standing there, wanting to flee, and they always, always laugh a shrill little laugh. Like the song was a really funny inside joke.



I had been working at the Neighborhood House with Dickie Lee for two years when *The Sound of Music* appeared in a pile of videos after a trip to the library. I cringed and put *Ben-Hur* on top, hoping it would disappear. But, one movie day, somebody slipped it into the VHS machine. A great, green whirling Julie Andrews started singing before I could stop her, and Dickie Lee sat right next to the speaker on the T.V. I made a point to clean the bathrooms for a long time that day to avoid it.

When the movie was over (well, we decided it was over after the goatherd puppet performance, since everyone but Dickie Lee and Rene had fallen asleep), Dickie Lee started humming the soundtrack. Days of humming, humming, humming. Songs that he had not heard in years, songs that had been displaced by Phil Collins and Elton John, they all came back. He hummed them all in a loop, until one stuck. The Maria song. Patting my arm, he hummed it. Coloring his sunrise pictures, he hummed it. It wormed its way around his brain and dug in. And then, after about a week of this, a week of me dreading that it would happen, it happened. He started singing. Quiet at first and then loud enough for the room to hear.

“DA DADA DU DA DU DA DUUDO!”

Oh no. Oh no.

“DA DA DU DU DU DA DU DOOO!”

I felt my face turn red hot, an instant sunburn. I wanted to hide. I wanted my name to be Julia, Rhonda, Sarah, anything but Maria.

But this is what came out of his mouth.

“NOBODY solves a problem like MA--RIA! NOBODY can catch a cloud and pin it down! NOBODY SOLVES A PROBLEM LIKE MA—RIA! Nobody holds a moonbeam in her hand.”

He lurched out of his seat and stood in the middle of the room, reaching his hands out for me, wobbling back and forth as he sang. I grabbed his hands and he pulled me in real close, arms crooking around my neck, chin stubble scraping my ear.

“Nobody! Nobody solves a problem like Maria Trombetta!”

Were you the first person who made me feel loved?

I ring the bell on Tuesday and the other Maria opens the door. She is just as nice in person and the home is clean and beautiful, thank god. She brings me into his room and hooks him up to the oxygen tank so he can talk and breathe at the same time. He is in a reclining hospital bed, eyes open. I sit next to him and he doesn't turn towards me. He looks smaller, face shaved, stubbly black hair cut short, a small sixty-six-year-old man sinking in to himself. I see the postcard of the Skunk Train I sent on the floor next to the bed, so someone must have read it to him. I rest my hand on his upper arm and try to think of something to say.

"I heard a Billy Joel song on the radio today."

"Which one?" He rolls his head slightly back and forth towards me.

"Piano Man." Which is not true, it was "Only the Good Die Young", my least favorite and too real for this moment. I suddenly can't think of anything to talk about. I feel awkward and sad. His white t-shirt has a tiny spot of dried blood on it, right under his ear. I look at his dresser and the CD's stacked up on it in desperation for a song. Journey? Is it possible that I will cry now every time Journey comes on the radio? He saves me by belting out Tina Turner unprompted. We sing "What's Love Got to Do with It" and move on to "True Colors" and "Joy to the World" and "Stand by Me". He tries to whistle "Can't Get No Satisfaction," but the oxygen tube is in the way and he starts clawing at it. I hold his hand and convince him to leave it in. We talk about when I came to San Francisco, and he remembers that I worked at the café in Noe Valley with our friend Max, who later got a job at the Neighborhood House after I put in a good word for him with the Boss.

"Max Doyle was born on October 5th in Washington D.C."

"You are right, Dickie Lee. When I started working with Max, he was only nineteen."

"He is thirty-three now. Just turned thirty-three."

I notice the tiny hairs on his scalp and how they have thinned over the years. I suddenly see an image of my father in a hospital bed, hair falling out, skin yellow, propped up on pillows and me by the side, rails digging into my arms. What will I sing to my father when it is his time? "Blackbird"? "I've Just

Seen a Face”? The fear of that day hits my stomach and I feel like I can’t breathe. This is coming for everyone, everyone I know and love and it is my job to watch and hold their hands and then be left all alone.

An hour goes by of us singing and talking and by the end of it I feel like no time has passed. We were right where we always started. But I know I should go now. His breathing is off and he seems tired. I say that I will come back next Tuesday to visit. The other Maria adjusts his oxygen and looks at me with big eyes and tells me to please come back next week, that he will look forward to it so much.



I was ready to come visit you on Tuesday, October 14th, I made plans to leave early and my bag was packed. I called your home and Maria answered again. She said she was sorry. It was fast. You died on October 10th, a Friday.

Maria Trombetta is a graduate student in the Creative Writing program at San Francisco State University. She is currently working on a nonfiction book about the Sonoma Developmental Center, one of the last institutions in California that houses people with developmental disabilities. She received her B.A. in Journalism from San Francisco State University and has written stories for the *Oakland Tribune* and the *Sonoma Index-Tribune*. She abandoned the city for the country and now lives with her family three hours from civilization, on the wild coast of Northern California.

