

# Nick

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Static. Nick turned the fine tuning knob with a feather touch, rolling the big knob with his fingers as delicately as if he were caressing a newborn baby. Nothing but static. Damn, this was frustrating. He had heard the signal, clear as day, and now it was gone. That in itself was not surprising. The sunspot activity of the past week had been unbelievable. And anyone who was worth his weight in amateur radio equipment knew that sunspots make for “skips”, those rare instances where the ions from the sun bombard the Earth with so much radiation, that the normal patterns of radio broadcasting (and therefore reception), become wonderfully enhanced. What would normally be a limit of say a thousand miles (No small feat in itself) becomes an instant doorway to the other side of the world!. It was just one of these elusive skips that Nick was trying to utilize.

He had heard the call only a minute before.

“CQ CQ CQ This is Victor Bravo Two Tango Hotel Victor Victor Bravo Two Tango Hotel Victor Victor Brav...”.

And then, static. The signal had been as clear as if the sender was in the next room using a megaphone, and now it was gone. The signal, in all its simplicity was like someone ringing the bells of Notre Damn next to Nicks head.

Nick was a ham, or more specifically, an amateur radio operator. Ham radio as a hobby has been around for over a hundred years, and as such has a multitude of practitioners, all of which are assigned a “Call sign” that identifies them to other hams around the world. In order for these hams to know to whom they are communicating with, a scheme was developed for the use of the call signs. Most specifically in this case, the prefix. In the United States, the only prefixes allowed are AA-AI, KA-KZ, NA-NZ, and WA-WZ. Other countries get other prefixes. The call sign that Nick heard was VB2THV, which when its prefix is cross referenced (something most hams do in their heads), shows that the signal Nick was trying feverishly to acquire was from Australia.

Nick was breathless with excitement. To talk to someone on the other side of the world was what amateur radio was all about! Sure it was cool to talk to some one a thousand miles away, but this was the other side! True magic through electronics! If only he could get that signal back.

“NICK, would you please turn off that radio and come downstairs.” Nicks mom was shouting from the bottom of the stairs, the way every mother in America that lives in a two story house does at one time or another in her life.

“Its raining out now and I don’t want you getting electrocuted” Nicks mom was a pain in the ass, especially when it came to storms.

“NICK, please turn that thing off, it makes me nervous!” She was climbing the stairs now, having overcome the unconscious laziness by way of her fear of her son getting electrocuted.

“You know how I feel about thunderstorms”

Nick pulled the headphone he was holding up against his left ear away, just long enough to hear a distant thunderclap.

“Don’t worry Ma, you know I grounded the rig properly, copper spikes in the ground and all that” Nick knew his mom didn’t know much about radio’s or electricity for that matter, but she did know that anything electrical should be grounded. She saw it on the learning channel, and never ceased to ask him if his equipment was properly grounded. He knew it was futile to argue with her about the way a ham radio shack should be configured, and since he had installed the proper copper grounding spike in the yard next to the antenna tower, he repeatedly reassured his mother that all was well.

“Besides, I just got a whiff of this DX from down under and I gotta get it back!” She was now watching him from the doorway to his room, having ascended the stairs in her attempt at saving him from the storm.

Not knowing or daring to ask what a DX was, she simply responded that to make his mother happy, he would kindly shut down the equipment and come down stairs to keep her company.

“OK, O.K., let me just try for another few seconds to get this signal back and I promise I’ll be right down.”

Knowing that was the best answer she was going to get, Nick’s mother reluctantly gave up her attempt and went downstairs. “Well don’t make it too long OK?”

She knew she wouldn’t get a response, seeing clearly in her mind, Nick, sitting at his radio, putting the headset back up to his ear and fiddling with those numerous knobs again. Sighing, she settled in listening to the classical music station from the city. The little portable radio was the only device she would use in a storm.

Nick’s mom was afraid of electricity, and more importantly, Lightning. When she was five, she had seen her mother go to the window of their second floor apartment during a storm and reach out to pull in the shutters. As she grabbed the shutters, the room was instantly overpowered with blue light which hurt her eyes. In the split second before she could look away, the image of her mother, shutters still in hand was burned into her young brain. To this day she could still see her mother, her back arched and every muscle in her body tense as if she were an Olympic body builder. The look on her face was one of absolute horror. The pain of electrocution, mixed with the instantaneous knowledge that she could not let go or move in any voluntary way, made for a look of intense terror that Nick’s mother would always recall, anytime the skies darkened, and the thunderclouds moved in.

Her mother had recovered almost instantly, having only gotten a “minor” shock which had traveled from the rooftop, down the drain system, and through the TV antenna they had strung from the window in the hopes of seeing Elvis swing his hips just a little more clearly on the stage of the Ed Sullivan Theater. The TV had not recovered so gracefully, having taken the brunt of the shock.

Nick tried the fine tuning for another minute or so, and having given up on that angle decided that he would try, against all odds, a re-adjustment of the antenna. As he reached out for the antenna tuning box, a loud thunderclap caught his attention.

“Huh, This storm must be closer than I thought.” he mumbled to himself, involuntarily pulling his hand from the antenna knob. “Just one more try”

Deciding that he would need to move fast in case the DX came through, he put the headphones on his head properly, and grabbed the table top microphone with his left hand, and grabbed the antenna tuner with his right.

Ever so slightly he turned the knob on the box connected to the motor sitting on top of the forty foot tower in the back yard. The huge antenna, looking like a television antenna on steroids, turned about an inch to the right, making the elements, which always reminded Nicks mother of the legs of a daddy long-leg spider, wag back and forth in the rain.

Electricity is an amazing thing. It behaves a lot like water, in that it flows, has pressure and follows the path of least resistance. Electricity flows down a wire because it is easier for the electrons to bounce along the highly conductive copper, than to try and bounce through the highly resistant rubber surrounding it. The human body makes use of both water and electricity and the fact that they both behave the way they do. Blood flows through the veins and arteries better than any irrigation system ever devised by man. Nerves carry electrical impulses to and from the brain and spinal cord, in exactly the same way the computer in a car tells the anti-lock brakes it's time to let up a little on the over zealous stomping being delivered by the panicked driver. The difference in the human body and the car, is that while the car may use 12 volts DC and 10 amps of current, the human body uses microvolts, and microampers of electricity. This is like saying the slow bubbly water from a public drinking fountain is the same as the tons of water spilling over Niagara Falls on a constant basis. While both are fundamentally the same, they are hardly the similar in intensity.

As Nick turned the antenna, the air changed outside. Far above his house, the clouds were in turmoil. Cold air and warm were mixing and, true to the rules of physics, warm air was rising. Also true to the physical law by which we all must live, that warm air rubs against the surrounding cooler air. If there is one thing that helps scientists uncover the rules of the universe, it is the simple fact that nature obeys the rules. The rule in question here is that of static electricity. If a balloon is rubbed on someone's head, it gains an electric charge. If air rubs against air in just the right way, it to gains an electric charge. In the balloon, the charge is mere entertainment, in that it can now be stuck to the wall. In the case of storm clouds, the charge builds until it cannot be contained in the cloud any longer.

When that point is reached, the massive amount of energy contained in the thundercloud has to go somewhere. The path of escape for this energy is chosen by least resistance. The origin of the path is chosen by the structure of the cloud. Sometimes the path is from the ground to the cloud. Other times it flies from cloud to cloud. This time the path started in the cloud and shot towards the ground.

Lightning travels very fast. The entire strike may last no more than a millionth of a second. In that infinitesimal amount of time, a thousand decisions are made. The power is spit out from the cloud and immediately starts flowing through ever easier paths. In the

time it takes the light from the lightning bolt to register in your brain, a multitude of branches have ensured that the electric charge will be dissipated in the most efficient manner possible. At all costs the power must reach the Earth, for that is the law, and nature cannot break the law.

In this millionth of a second, the path had led to the top of a tall steel tower in the suburbs of New Jersey. Once that decision had been made (By the lightning?, By God?), very few decisions were left to be made. The Steel tower conducted the flow well enough, but an even better path had been found. In the perfection that is nature, the path of power was chosen to be the highly conductive coaxial cable connected to the antenna, which was still swaying from it's recent turn.

At this point, the lightning started to dissipate some of it's massive energy by any means available to it. One of those being radio waves. In the instant that the lightning struck the tower, a peculiar sound started to be heard by Nick in his headphones, now securely wrapped around his head. Unfortunately, Nicks body had about one millionth of a second to hear the noise, decide trouble was imminent, send an electrical impulse to the muscles controlling the arms, and have that impulse acted upon by the muscles. The human body is a wonderful machine. It is however nightmarishly slow when compared to the flow of electrons through a copper cable.

Another ten millionth of a second passed as the power tore down the cable, looking for it's ultimate destination, the Earth. Suddenly, a fork in the road appeared, one leading to an enticingly smooth path of pure, solid copper, the other continuing on down the tougher path of the thinner copper cable. Normally this new path of pure copper would have been the last leg for the power, as it was a copper spike thrust into the ground for just such a purpose. This grounding rod however, was not thrust into the ground as it was supposed to be. Instead it was laying on top of a wooden table in the yard. Wood is not as good a conductor as copper wire, so the path of the grounding rod was not chosen.

As the power continued on its search for the Earth, it wound its way through the antenna cable, into the house and into the Kenwood short wave transceiver that Nick had saved all his money for two years to buy.

When Nick bought his beautiful ham radio, he was of course worried that a lightning strike nearby would travel through the electrical system of the house and damage or even destroy his new purchase. For that very reason, he purchased a surge protector with a built in circuit breaker and spike protector. It was, of course, the smart thing to do.

As the power found the Kenwood, it discovered a thousand new paths to take, but they were all to small. The power didn't care for such tiny paths, and in it's passing fused them all into one mess of melted metal and silicone. Two paths were of interest though, the first being especially enticing, as it seemed to lead to more high capacity copper wire. As the power tried to take that path, the way was cut suddenly cut off. More precisely, the path had ceased to exist. The spike protector and circuit breaker had done it's job, only instead of saving the beloved Kenwood radio, it prevented the house electrical system from overloading and starting a fire.

With this preferred path cut off, the power searched for the next best thing. The new path of choice was the microphone. The power surged out the microphone and found another reasonably good conductor. A human body.

Three hundred and fifty million volts coursed from the microphone into Nicks body. His body had no way of coping with such an overload. His nerves were used to millivolts, and now it was getting megavolts. For that split second that the power used him as it's path, Nicks body went rigid, his flew eyes open, and his thoughts scrambled. He had no chance to scream, for the very process of screaming involves the nervous system. Nicks nervous system had not had the benefit of a spike protector. It simply had to make due.

The power cared not for any of this. It didn't care that Nicks very means for existence had just been overloaded to the point of shutting down. It didn't care that Nick may die from the powers will to find the Earth. Nature doesn't have a conscience, it simply is.

The power had one goal. The Earth. It continued on it's quest. It discovered that through Nick's right hand, there was another path to be had. After a short arc from Nicks body to the antenna tuner, It found another slick copper cable. after a short trip from the antenna box to the wall, this cable found another grounding rod, this one secure firmly into the ground. The power had found it's new home, back to mother Earth, where it would be absorbed, recycled, and converted to whatever force nature would need it for. Another cycle of nature was complete.

In the split second that the lightning had coursed through Nick's body, his body had no hope of coping. It reacted in the only way it could. It shut down.

Conciseness is a process of electrical flow through the neurons of the brain. All of these processes had been shorted by immense power. Nick quickly became unconscious.

Breathing is an involuntary reflex controlled by nerve impulses. Nerve impulses are carried by electricity. Nick Stopped breathing.

The heart pumps blood by a collection of cells called the pacemakers sending impulses to the heart. Electrical impulses. Nicks heart stopped beating.

Externally, Nicks body was subject to a few traumas as well. When the power was done with him, it left his body with a jolt. Nick's body was thrown back from the radio with the force of being struck by a bullet. The point of entry for the power had been his left hand. The point of exit, his right. As he was thrown from the radio, his arms flew back as if some unseen puppet master had pulled on his strings to hard.

Having been sated at the desk where his equipment was set up, and the lightning having traveled predominantly through the upper part of his body, Nick was bent backwards from the force of the attack. As gravity took over and he started to slam into the ground, his knees slammed into the bottom of the desk. The chair, which mere seconds ago had given him support, was now between him and the floor. Though obeying different physical laws, Nicks body was now very much like the lightning that attacked him, in that he now too sought only to find the Earth. While the lightning followed the laws of electricity, Nick was obeying the laws of gravity.

Nick finally came to rest, six feet from the desk, in a crumpled heap on the floor. His body was motionless except for the occasional twitch caused by his nervous system being overloaded by the biggest shock anyone or anything could ever receive.

In the room, all was silent except for the quiet smoldering of the beloved Kenwood as its transistors and microprocessors, having been fused by the heat, had transformed in

the blink of an eye, from a two thousand dollar, state of the art, piece of electronic miracle, to a lump of useless, albeit very warm, silicon and plastic.

Nicks mom had been listening to Ravels “Bolero” on her battery powered transistor radio, when the room had light up with an eerie blue glow, and the thunder had not followed, but occurred simultaneously. The noise had been so loud, that it had hurt her ears, causing her to wince in pain. The thunder had been so loud and instantaneous, that it concealed any sound the Kenwood had made when it exploded. Nick had had no such luxury as screaming.

When she recovered from the noise, she realized that the house had been struck by lightning. Memories of her own mother flooded back to her, and the connection was made in her brain. Nicks antenna tower was the highest point around. If anything was going to get struck by lightning, that was going to be it. She knew Nick had grounded everything, she was zealous about asking him if he had. Still, she had a feeling. Sometimes, a mother just knows when something is wrong with her child.

As Nicks mom ran up the stairs, she started to smell the distinct odor of burnt transformers. Not knowing what it was, but assuming it wasn't good, she quickened her pace.

“Nick?”

“Nick are you all right?”

As she rounded the top of the stairs and came to Nick's room, she came face to face with a wall of smoke.

She took a couple steps into the room, dazed by what she saw. The room was filled with acrid black smoke. The smell was overpowering. The view was nightmarishly surreal. This was not the way this room was supposed to look. Her mind was numb, overcome by the realization that her nemesis, lightning had been here.

A mother senses things that other members of the same species can never understand. Upon entering a room where one of her children is, her senses become more acute. Without even realizing it, the mothers brain starts gathering data. Very subtle sounds, unheard to anyone else, are heard. A child's breathing is always heard. The smell of a mothers child is known to her, if only subconsciously. This is a carry over from prehistoric times, when such things were much more important.

When Nick's mom entered the room, she was dazed by the obvious destruction. She looked around not seeing anything, rather she just stared. In the older parts of her brain, an alarm went off. The normal sounds that should be heard, even above the other noises that might be present, were not there. Her son's breathing was evident. The normal smell of her son was not there. This alarm was sent to the conscious centers of the brain, but was met with resistance. She was in shock. This alarm was very persistent however, as it was based on the mothering instinct, perhaps one of the most powerful instincts in nature.

“NICK!” she screamed, and coming out of her daze, took another quick step into the room. Seeing Nick's body strewn across the floor

“Oh my God” she muttered.