

Sound of Terror

Don Berry

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The image features a vibrant green background with several thick, bright blue geometric shapes. These shapes include horizontal and vertical lines, a large inverted triangle in the upper left, a curved line resembling a quarter-circle in the upper right, and another inverted triangle in the lower right. The shapes are arranged in a way that suggests a path or a series of connected elements, possibly representing a maze or a sequence of steps. The overall aesthetic is modern and minimalist.

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SOUND OF TERROR ***

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What is more frightening than the fear of the unknown? Johnny found out!

SOUND OF TERROR

BY DON BERRY

THE DAY was still no more than a ragged streak of red in the east; the pre-dawn air was sharply cold, making Johnny Youngbear's face feel slightly brittle as he dressed quietly in the gray bedroom.

He sat down on the bed, pulling on his boots, and felt his wife stir sleepily beneath the covers. Suddenly she stiffened, sat upright in the bed, startled into wakefulness. Johnny put one dark, bony hand on her white shoulder, gently, reassuring. After a moment, finding herself, she turned away and lit a cigarette. Johnny finished pulling on his boots and stood, his hawk-like face unreadable in the cold gray light streaming through the huge picture window.

"Johnny?" said his wife hesitantly.

He murmured an acknowledgement, watching the bright flare of color as she drew on the cigarette. Her soft, dark hair was coiled loosely around her shoulders, very black against the pale skin. Her eyes were invisible in shadow, and Johnny could not read their expression. He turned away, knowing she was watching him.

"Be careful," she said simply.

"Try," he said. Then he shrugged. "Not my day, anyway."

"I know," she said. "But—be careful."

He left the house and walked out into the chill desert dawn. He turned his face to the brightness in the east, trying to catch a little warmth, but could not.

He warmed up the jeep, listening to the engine grumble protest until it settled to a flat, banging roar. He swerved out of the driveway with a screaming of tires. Reaching the long ribbon of concrete that led out into the desert, he settled down hard on the accelerator, indifferent to the whining complaint of the jeep's motor.

It was eight miles from his sprawling house to the Mesa Dry Lake launching

site, due east, into the sun. He pulled to the top of Six Mile Hill and stopped in the middle of the highway. Two miles ahead was Launching Base I, throwing long, sharp shadows at him in the rosy dawn light. A cluster of squat, gray blockhouses; a long runway tapering into the distance with an Air Force B-52 motionless at the near end; that was all.

Except the Ship.

The Ship towered high, dominating the desert like a pinnacle of bright silver. Even silhouetted against the eastern sky, it sparkled and glistened. Impassive it stood, graceful, seeming to strain into the sky, anxious to be off and gone. The loading gantry was a dark, spidery framework beside The Ship, leaning against it, drawing strength from its sleek beauty.

Johnny watched it in silence for a moment, then turned his eyes up, to the sky. Somewhere up there a tiny satellite spun wildly about the earth, a little silver ball in some celestial roulette wheel. Gradually it would spiral closer and closer, caught by the planet's implacable grasp, until it flared brightly like a cigarette in the heavens before dissolving into drops of molten metal.

But it would have served its purpose. In its short life it would have given Man knowledge; knowledge of space, knowledge enough that he could go himself, knowing what he would find in the emptiness between the earth and the moon. Or knowing nearly.

What's it like out there?

The satellite answered partly; the Ship would answer more.

Johnny slammed the jeep into gear, hurtled down the other side of Six Mile Hill. Through his mind ran the insistent repetition of an old song he knew, and he hummed it tunelessly through closed teeth.

I had a true wife but I left her ... oh, oh, oh.

The jeep skidded to a halt beside Control. Mitch Campbell's green station wagon was already there, creaking and settling as the motor cooled.

Control was full of people; Air Force brass, technicians, observers, enlisted men of indiscernible purpose. The room hummed with the muted buzz of low, serious conversation.

Mitch Campbell sat in one corner, apparently forgotten in the confusion. He had nothing to do. Not yet. He was already in flight dress, holding the massive helmet in his hands morosely, turning it over and over, staring at it as though he thought he might find his head inside if he looked carefully enough.

"Morning, Colonel," said Johnny, forcing his voice to be casual and cheerful. "You're up early this morning."

"Morning, Colonel, yourself," said Mitch, looking up.

"Big date today?"

"Well—yeah, you might say so," Mitch said, smiling faintly and with obvious effort. "Thought I might go once around lightly," he said, hooking his thumb upwards. Upwards through the concrete ceiling, into the air, through the air, up where there was no air for a man to breathe. Once around lightly.

Around the world. Lightly.

"Tell you what, Mitch."

"O.K., tell me what," he said.

"You like the movies?" Johnny asked. "You like to get a little adventure in your soul? You like a little vicarious thrill now and then?"

"Yeah, I like that."

"Tell you what. We'll go. No, don't thank me. We'll go. Tonight. Eight o'clock, you come by."

"Wives and everybody?" Mitch asked.

"Why not?" Johnny said. "They're cooped up in the house all day."

They both knew the wives would be in Control in an hour, listening to the radio chatter, waiting, eyes wide, shoulders stiff and tight.

"Fine," said Mitch. "Fine."

A crew-chief came up and touched Johnny's shoulder. "Colonel Youngbear," he said, "Observation is going up."

Johnny stood and looked out the tiny window at the red-painted B-52.

"See you tonight, Mitch. Eight o'clock? Don't forget. Westerns."

"See you," said Mitch. He looked back down at the helmet and was turning it over and over again when Johnny left.

THE OBSERVATION B-52 climbed, screaming.

Johnny lit a cigarette and watched out the port at the contrails rolling straight and white behind the jets.

He sat by the radioman, a Sergeant, ignoring the rest of the officers in the converted bomb-bay.

"Hope he makes it, Colonel," said the Sergeant.

"He'll make it," Johnny said flatly, irritated. Relenting, he added in a gentler tone, "The pilot section breaks away. If he gets in serious trouble, he can dump it and ride the nose down. Like a bird. He'll make it."

There was a raucous buzz, and a squawk box said: "On my mark it will be Zero minus four minutes ... mark!" The voice of Control, 35,000 feet below.

The B-52 swung ponderously onto the base leg of its circle, and there was a creaking of stretching metal inside.

"Minus two minutes." *Not my day, anyway*, Johnny thought. He lit another cigarette.

"Control," said a new voice, "This is Red Leader. Red Leader. Red Flight is in position."

"Rog, Red Leader," Control acknowledged. The Observation flight of jet fighters was waiting, too.

"Minus five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... mark!"

Silence.

I had a true wife but I left her ... oh, oh, oh.

There was another rattle of the speaker, and Mitch's voice came through, grunting, heavy, as the acceleration of the Ship laid a heavy hand on his chest.

"Acceleration ... eight gee ... controls respond."

Silence.

"There he is," someone said. A wavering trail of smoke was barely visible below, a thread of white, coming up fast, blown erratically by winds into a distorted tiny snake.

"Altitude ..." said Mitch's voice, "40,000.... Acceleration ... dropping."

The white snake wriggled up to their level, rose above them. Johnny could not see the silver head.

"Altitude ... 65,000.... I have a loud, very high buzz in my headphones. I'm going to—there, it's gone now, went out of my range."

His voice sounded wrong to Johnny, but he couldn't pin it down.

"Altitude ... 105,000. Beginning orbital correction. Beginning—beginning ... I can't—I'm—I'm—" The voice became unintelligible. It was pitched very high, like a woman's, and it sounded as if his teeth were chattering.

"Mitch," Johnny pleaded softly. "Mitch, baby. Dump it, boy, come on home, now. Dump it."

There was no more from the speaker. A confused babble broke out in the bomb-bay. The Sergeant fiddled with his dials frantically, spinning across wavelengths, trying to find a word. The confusion ceased when the speaker rattled again, seeming hours later.

"Uh, hello, Control, this is Red Three, do you read me?" One of the fighter flight.

"Rog, Red Three, go ahead," came Control's voice from below.

"Uh, Control, I have a flash and smoke cloud on a bearing of three-seven degrees."

"Red Three, what altitude? What altitude?"

"None," said the fighter pilot. "On the deck."

After a moment, Johnny climbed unsteadily to his feet in the midst of a booming silence. He made his way back along the catwalk to the head, where he retched violently until the tears came to his eyes.

THREE WEEKS later, Johnny sat in Doctor Lambert's office. He watched the lean, graying psychologist turn off the tape recorder, watched him methodically tamp tobacco in his pipe.

"That's all she wrote, Johnny," said Lambert, finally. "That recording of Mitch's voice is just about all we have. The Ship was under full power when it hit. There wasn't much left."

Johnny looked absently out the window at the gleaming needle of Ship II beside the flimsy-looking gantry. Full power was a lot of power.

The psychologist followed Johnny's eyes. "Beautiful," he said, and the word brought to Johnny's mind the wide-eyed pale face of Mitch's wife, staring at him.

"That Ship is the best we can make her," Lambert said. "Engineering is as certain as they can be that there was no structural failure on Ship I."

"So?" Johnny said, still staring at the Ship. Even at this distance, he could almost believe he could see his own lean face reflected in the shining metal.

"So we look somewhere else for the cause of failure," said Lambert.

"Where?" said Johnny. He turned back, saw that the psychologist was putting a new reel on the tape recorder.

"The weak link in the control system," Lambert said.

"There weren't any."

"One."

"What?"

"Mitch Campbell."

Johnny stood, angry. "Mitch was good. Damn good."

The psychologist looked up, and his eyes were tired. "I know it," he said calmly. "Listen to this." He started the machine playing the new tape.

Johnny listened to it through. The voice that came out was high and wavering. It shook, it chattered, words were indistinguishable. It was thin with tension, and it rang in Johnny's ears with unwanted familiarity.

"What's it sound like to you?" Lambert asked when it had finished.

"Like Mitch's voice," Johnny admitted reluctantly.

"It did to me, too. What do you think it is?"

"Don't know," said Johnny shortly. "Might be a pilot whose plane is shaking apart."

"No."

"I don't know."

Lambert sat back down behind his desk and sucked on his pipestem. He regarded Johnny impassively, seeming to consider some problem remote from the room.

Abruptly, he stood again and went to the window, watching the ant-like activity around the base of Ship II.

"That was a madman's voice," he said. "I made the recording while I was interning at a state institution."

"So?"

"Mad with fear," Lambert said. "Pure. Simple. Unadulterated. That was the sound of terror you heard, Johnny. Terror such as few humans have ever known. That man knew such fear he could not remain sane and live with it."

I had a true wife but I left her ... oh, oh, oh.

"You think Mitch—"

"You said yourself the voices were alike." Lambert pointed out.

"I don't believe it."

"Don't have to," said Lambert, turning from the window. "But I'll tell you something, Johnny. That Ship—" he hooked his thumb out the window—"is a very big toy. Maybe too big."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's possible we've reached beyond Man's limitations. Meaning it's possible we've built something too big for a man to handle and stay sane. Maybe we've finally gone too far."

"Maybe."

"I don't insist it's true," said the psychologist. "It's an idea. Fear. Fear of the unknown, maybe. Too much fear to hold."

"You think I'll crack?" asked Johnny.

The psychologist didn't answer directly. "It's an idea, as I said. I just wanted you to think it over."

"I will," said Johnny. He stood again, his jaw held tight. "Is that all?"

"Yes, Colonel, that's all," said Lambert.

When Johnny left, the psychologist sat in brooding silence, staring morosely at a trail of blue smoke rising from his pipe bowl. He sat there until the afternoon light faded from the desert base. Then he stood in the darkened office, sighed, lit his pipe and went home. He was very tired.

SIX WEEKS later, Johnny Youngbear walked out of the Control blockhouse into the cold desert morning, carrying his helmet under his arm.

He ran his eyes swiftly up the length of Ship II, trying to forget those other eyes staring at his back from the blockhouse. The Ship rippled and gleamed, alive, eager, the thundering power in her belly waiting to be born.

Oh, you bitch! You beautiful bitch, Johnny thought. Pregnant with power like a goddess with a god's child. Bitch, bitch, bitch! I love you. I hate you. You kill me.

The crew-chief walked by his side. "Nice morning, Colonel," he said.

"Very," said Johnny.

I had a true wife but I left her ... oh, oh, oh. For you, you beautiful bitch.

"Say something, Colonel?" asked the crew-chief.

"No. Song running through my head," he explained.

"Yeah," the other man chuckled. "I know how it is."

They strapped him into the padded control chair, the controls arranged around him in a neat semicircle, easy to reach.

This is my day.

They left him. Alone. *Once around lightly.*

The loneliness was in his belly, aching like a tumor.

"... read me?" Control's voice in his earphones.

"Loud and clear," he said absently.

"... minus two minutes ... mark!" A different voice. So many different voices. They knew him, they talked to him. But he was alone with his bitch.

I had a true wife but—

"... minus one minute ... mark!"

This is my day I had a true wife—

"... three ... two ... one ... mark!"

There was the sound of a world dying in his mind, the sound of thunder, the sound of a sun splitting, the sound of a goddess giving birth, with pain with agony in loneliness.

A giant's fist came from out of nothingness and smashed into his body. His chest was compressed, his face was flattened, he could not get enough air to breathe. The heavy sledge of acceleration crushed him back into the padded chair, inexorable, implacable, relentless, heavy. His vision clouded in red and he thought he would die. Instead, he spoke into the lip mike, resenting it bitterly.

"Acceleration ... nine gee." He looked at the gauge that shimmered redly before him, disbelieving. "Altitude 20,000."

He blacked out, sinking helplessly into the black plush night of unawareness. *I had a true I had I had—*

Awakening to pain, he glanced at the gauges. He had been gone only a split second.

"Altitude 28,000, acceleration pressure dropping."

His face began to resume its normal shape as the acceleration dropped. "... six gee," he said, and breathing was easier. The giant reluctantly began to withdraw his massive fist from Johnny's face.

He tipped a lever, watched the artificial horizon tilt slightly. "Air control surfaces respond," he said. But soon there would be no air for the surfaces to move against, and then he would control by flicking the power that rumbled behind him.

"Altitude 40,000 ...

"... 85,000 ...

"... 100,000...." The sky was glistening black, he was passing from the earth's envelope of air into the nothingness that was space. Now.

Now.

Now it was time to change angle, flatten the ship out, bring it into position to run around the earth. *Once around lightly.*

There was a high-pitched scream in his earphones. He remembered it had been there for long, and wondered if he had told Control.

He flicked the switch that ignited the powerful steering rockets, and the whine grew louder, unbearably loud. It sang to him, his bitch sang, *I had a true wife, but I left her ... oh, oh, oh.*

He began to feel a light tingle over his body, tiny needles delicately jabbing every inch. His face became wooden, felt prickly. He tried to lick his lips and could feel no sensation there. His vision fogged again, and he knew it was not from acceleration this time, it was something else.

Something else.

What's it like out there?

His belly told him. Fear.

He reached out his hand to touch the control panel, and his arm did not respond. It was shaking, uncontrollably, and moved off to the right of where he wanted it to go. When he tried to correct, it swung too far to the left, waving as if it were alive. It hung there before him as in a dream, oscillating back and forth.

He could not control his body, and the realization nurtured the tiny seed of panic that lay heavily in his belly.

Dump it....

What did that mean? *Dump it ... go home now, baby ... I had a true ...*

Decision ... there was a decision he had to make, but he was too frightened to know what it was.

He had been born in fear and lived in fear and his body was full of it, quivering to the lover's touch of fear. Falling, darkness, the fear of dying, the unknown, the unimaginable always lurking just out of the corner of his eye.

He wanted to scream and the fear choked it off. His hands were at his sides, limply useless, dangling at the seat. He had to hang on to something. His hand found a projection at the side of the seat. He clutched it desperately.

He knew he would fall, down, spiraling, weightless, off the cliff as in a dream, off the ladder, the tree, he was a child and his toes were tingling as he stood too near the edge of the cliff, knowing he might fall.

He clutched tightly, putting every ounce of his strength into holding on to the lever, the single solid reality in a world of shifting unreality. He was going to fall he was falling I love you I hate you I had a true wife ...

THERE WAS softness beneath his back, and he moved his hands, feeling the crispness of sheets. There was a low murmur of voices. He raised his hands to

his eyes and the voices stopped. There were heavy bandages on his eyes.

"Colonel?" came a questioning voice, and Johnny realized it was Doctor Lambert. "Awake?"

"I can't see. Why can't I see?"

"You'll be all right. It's all right."

"What happened?"

"How much do you remember?" asked the voice. "The blast-off?"

"Yes—yes, I remember that."

"The orbit? The landing?"

"No," he said. "Not that."

"You did it," said the voice. "You made it."

This is my day. Once around lightly.

"Johnny," said the voice. "I don't know just how to say this. We know what was wrong with Ship I, and why it killed Mitch. We know—hell, we don't even begin to realize what we have at our fingertips now. It's so big it's impossible to evaluate."

"What? I don't—"

"Sound, Johnny, sound. Or rather, vibration. It's something we're just beginning to learn about. We know a few things; we know you can boil water with sound if the frequency is high enough. And you can drill metal with it—and it does things to the human body.

"There are frequencies of sound which can act directly on human nerves, directly on the human brain. It means that if we know the right frequency, we'll be able to produce any state we want in a man, any emotion. Fear, anguish, anything.

"When the steering rockets were cut in, the Ship began to vibrate. It generated frequencies so high that ordinary human senses couldn't detect them. And when your nerves were exposed to those vibrations, it produced fear. Pure and absolute fear. Motor control went, rational processes went, all the nervous functions of the body went out of control. Your body became a giant tuning fork, and the

frequency to which it vibrated was fear.

"I can't remember—"

"Sanity went, too, Johnny," said the man softly. "You could not stand that fear and remain sane, so something cut off. That was what happened to Mitch."

"How did I get back?"

"We don't know. The films show your face suddenly going blank. Then you flew. That's all. We hoped you could tell us."

"No. No—I don't remember—"

"There was something in you so strong it overrode everything else, even the fear. We'd like to know what it is. We'll find out, Johnny, and it will mean a lot to the human race when we do."

This is my day.

"Is my wife here?"

There was a cool hand on his forehead. "Yes, Johnny."

"Well," he said helplessly. "Well, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Johnny," she whispered, and there was the sound of tears in her voice. "I'm just fine."

He felt the warm softness of her lips on his.

I had a true wife but I left her ... oh, oh, oh.

And then he came home again.

END

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