A Funky Assortment of Plates by Earl Marona Jr.

**The summer we decided** we were Christians, I started singing solos at church. “Specials” is what the preacher called them. Every Sunday he said the same thing: “Is there anybody here who feels moved to bless us with song, and sing us a special?”

One day I stood up and stepped into the aisle. I didn’t tell my mother anything about it beforehand. I just got up and did it. I marched myself to the front of the church. The preacher leaned down and looked me in the eye. He laid his hand on my chest and said, “Do it just like I told you, son. Sing from here.” He pressed the spot over my heart. “Sing loud. When you get to that one part, do that thing with your hands. Try to remember to breathe every once in a while. If you get scared, look at me.”

I sang a song about the Pharisees, and another one about the Good Samaritan. I forgot all about the thing with my hands, and I didn’t take my eyes off him once.

After that the preacher started swinging by our place on Saturday mornings to pick me up. I would climb into the cab of his truck and slap him a high five. The two of us would drive to a neighboring church, where I would sing a special at a youth rally or an all-day singing, with dinner on the grounds.

One time they had a microphone.

I was asked to sing another. And another. And another.

A lot of people got saved.

I wore a suit.

I’ve got pictures.

**Before we were Christians** we lived in town. My mother had a boyfriend with muscles and tattoos. When Muscles left us for the last time, she put all his stuff in a cardboard box and set it out on the sidewalk. I hauled his weights out there myself, one plate at a time. I squatted and lifted, the way I’d seen Muscles do it. I toted each plate down the steps and out to the sidewalk while she stood around and watched with a drink in one hand and a Kleenex in the other. She had on a white floppy hat and big round sunglasses made out of white plastic. It was one of her outfits, the one she wore when she covered herself with baby oil and laid out on a beach towel in the backyard.

Getting rid of Muscles was hard work. Every once in a while I had to stop and remind myself to breathe. “Damn,” I said, the way Muscles said it. “These are some heavy-ass weights.”

She pushed up her glasses with the one hand, the one that held the drink, and dabbed at her eyes with the other. “Don’t say that, honey. Don’t cuss. We’re not cussing people anymore. Do you hear? We don’t cuss. We’re somebody else now. Do you hear?” She dabbed at her eyes again. Then she made a choking sound and held the Kleenex close to her chest.

I stared at my feet and held my breath. My tennis shoe had a hole in the toe. Just a little one. I worked my big toe around it till it was sticking out like a snail head.

I looked at her again.

She just stood there, clutching the Kleenex and making those noises. Finally she went back in the house. I heard her go into the kitchen and open the freezer. I heard her get out some ice and drop it into her glass. Everything got quiet after that.

I let out a big sigh and went back to my weights. I was putting them in stacks. Stacks of five pounds, stacks of ten pounds, stacks of everything Muscles had. When I was done I stood back to have a look. Not one of the stacks was even with the other. It’s what Muscles used to call a “funky assortment of plates.” But Muscles said it didn’t matter if you had four plates on one end of a bar bell and eight plates on the other end. What mattered was that you had equal amounts of weight. Muscles called it *prison style,* on account of how in prison nothing matched, and a man had to make do with what he had. I asked him how he knew such a thing. Muscles said not to worry about it; it was just something he knew.

I stood on the sidewalk for a while longer to see if anything happened. Every once in a while somebody would walk by and look in the box. A man wearing a hat came by and pulled out one of the T-shirts. It was the one with writing on it that said *Crazy Beats Big—Every Time.* Muscles wore it when he worked out. The man with the hat held it up in front of himself and gave me a look. I tilted my head to the side and squinted. He was fat. He was really fat. The T-shirt would never fit him. Besides, I decided I wanted it for myself. I straightened up and shook my head. The man with the hat tossed it back in the box and went on his way. I waited till he was a good piece down the sidewalk, then I took off my shirt and put on Muscles’s T-shirt. It fit me like a tent, and it smelled like Muscles. I stood around for a while longer. Nobody else came by so I went back in the house. Mom stayed in her room the rest of the day and cried. I stayed in my room listening to records and watching myself sing in the mirror. She came out two or three times to fix herself another drink. Each time I turned off the record player and held my breath. I tiptoed over and pressed my ear to the door. I heard her take ice out of the freezer and plop it into her glass. I heard the stuff splash and crackle over the ice. I heard her go back into her room and close the door to cry some more. Then I turned the record player on again and went back to my mirror.

When it got dark I went out to check on the box. There wasn’t much left. Just a couple of Shuggie Otis records, and an Afro pick. There were two pairs of underwear with holes in them, and some muscle magazines. Somebody had hauled off all the weights. I carried the box into the house and took it to my room. I looked at the muscle magazines for a while, then put them back in the box and shoved everything under my bed. For the rest of the night I played Shuggie Otis records and sat on my bed and sang. Once or twice I got up to look at myself in the mirror, but mostly I just sat there singing and trying to remember to breathe till I finally fell asleep.

Not long after that, we decided we were country people and moved out of town. The day we left, she packed all our stuff into the car. Everything except my record player and the box I kept under the bed. I carried those out to the car myself. I put the record player in the box on top of everything else. I felt weird about the muscle magazines, and even weirder about the T-shirt and the holey underwear. I didn’t want her to see anything that might remind her of Muscles and set her to crying again.

When it was finally time to leave we got in the car. She had on one of her outfits. The one she liked to drive in. A coat with a belt around the middle and a collar she always kept turned up. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she was wearing her big white plastic sunglasses.

We sat there for the longest time. Nobody said anything.

Finally, she spoke. She said this was a fresh start. Said she was going to try to be better. We were country people now.

When we got there, we decided we were Christians too. We started going to church, and I started singing specials.