

# Stereophonic Aggression

Aubri K. Adkins

We're alone together this evening and he seems to decide I'm not so bad. Sometimes, especially when his parents aren't around, I think it's possible he doesn't dislike me.

He's made it clear he hates translating between his parents and me. Slovak to English, English to Slovak—all the small talk we make through him about dinner, the weather, or whatever basic things his parents want to talk about. He acts like he hates talking to his parents at all. His face says translating is excruciating and that we are stupid for needing him to do it.

His parents never had the option to learn English in high school—Russian was the foreign language of choice. Most people in my hometown couldn't locate the Slovak Republic on a map, let alone would want to learn a Slovak word. Yet here we sit at their dinner table, a Slovak family and an American girl, night after night, making small talk as best we can.

My host brother has an unspoken point—this will be a long year if I don't learn quickly.

Tonight, his parents are away, and he offers to cook me dinner. He boils noodles, covers them with ketchup, and calls it spaghetti. I guess it is. I twirl my noodles on my fork while he slurps from his bowl.

After we eat, he directs me to step out on their tiny balcony, just off the kitchen. He wants to show me his telescope. He points it to the Soviet looking broadcasting needle and then to the Bratislava castle before admitting, mischievously, he (sometimes) spies on people in the apartment buildings nearby. I feign shock before I tell him I have a friend back home that uses her telescope to spy on the boy next door. I ask him to guess whether I ever looked with her—his smile shows me he thinks I did. Sometimes I think he doesn't dislike me.

His mother comes home so he invites me to the room where I sleep, the family room. He shuts the door behind us. I'm looking at the shut door in curiosity, as though it will tell me his intention, when he tells me to sit down and be quiet. I do that. I watch him hook up my Discman to the stereo.

Suddenly, distorted, screaming guitar blasts through the speakers and an aggressive drum-and-bass beat follows. Everyone in our Soviet-era concrete apartment hive must hear—it's so loud the windows shake as the stereo cranks out The Prodigy:

I'M A FIRESTARTER, TWISTED FIRESTARTER

His mom rushes in and screams at him, fighting the music, in the language I'm still learning. Her words are unintelligible, but her tone is universal.

He leisurely shuts off my Discman. She's powerless—she doesn't know how. He sits back down on the couch, my bed, and smirks.

He's definitely not going to translate for her, so she'll have to act it out—she turns to me and in exaggerated body language shows me how disappointed she is in how bad he is. Now it's my turn to be in the middle of a conversation.



The Prodigy

"Firestarter"

*The Fat of the Land*

06/1997

XL · Maverick

We wait until she leaves the family room and then we laugh—me in embarrassment, him because his prank worked. It's going to be a long year and I better learn quickly.

He clicks on the TV with the remote and chooses the channel. We watch EuroSports TV because race-car driving is on.

He tells me he wants to see them crash.