



# WAITE

(AND)

# WALKIN' HAWKINS

Waite Evers knew life and death were in the power of the tongue, but he had no idea how much power until the fall of 1978 as he hosted his morning show on Country 16 in Emmaus, West Virginia. That morning, with Tammy Wynette and George Jones singing about a golden ring, he saw a light blink on the request line.

by CHRIS FABRY



**“W**AITE, I NEED to talk to you.” Recognizing the voice and seeing an opportunity to connect with his listeners, Waite flipped on the microphone, gave the time and temperature, and said, “Look who’s called us; it’s Walkin’ Hawkins. Tommy, we haven’t heard from you in a while.”

Tommy was a fixture in Emmaus. He walked by the roadside, wearing a dirty Cincinnati Reds baseball cap and a T-shirt that was more holes than shirt. He had a long beard that reached past his belt buckle, and he carried a transistor radio as he paced the highway. Tommy always seemed in a state of unpredictable but perpetual motion.

“I’m not calling in a request, Waite.”

Waite heard something in his voice. It was higher pitched, and his breathing was off.

“What’s going on, Tommy?”

“I got myself in a pickle.”

Waite heard a distant siren through the phone line.

“Where in the world are you, Tommy?”

“Johnny’s Feed and Seed. They’re after me.”

“Who’s after you?”

“I don’t have time to explain. But I’m not taking it anymore, Waite.”

“All right, hold on,” Waite said, starting the next 45 on the turntable. “Glenn Campbell is going to sing about being a lineman for the county. You’re listening to Country 16, the best Country in the country.”

Waite turned off the mic and picked up the phone. “Tommy, tell me what’s happening over there.”

There came an indecipherable string of accusations on the owner of the Feed and Seed who, as it turned out, was in the same room and begging for Tommy to put down the gun he held.

Thinking quickly, Waite waved to the station secretary, Ardell Bellweather, who picked up the line. “Ardell, talk with Tommy while I drive over to the Feed and Seed.”

Waite quickly enlisted the help of the midday host, jumped in his truck, and sped along County Line Road, his heart thumping. Five minutes later he slid to a stop in the sparse gravel in front of the store. Two sheriffs’ cruisers sat with their lights swirling. Both deputies had guns drawn and stood behind their cars.



Waite recognized the deputy with a choirboy face as Art Palermo.

“You need to stay back, Waite,” Deputy Palermo said.

“Tommy called me at the station.

Said he was in a pickle.”

“He’s in one all right. A bushel basket full. About to get himself killed.”

“Look, I know this old boy.”

“We all know him, Waite.”

“He wouldn’t hurt a fly when he’s in his right mind.”

“Well, he’s not anywhere close to his right mind. Get back in your truck.”

Waite took a step toward the man. “Art, let me speak with him. He’s confused. That he called me at the station is a sign he wants help.”

The two deputies exchanged glances. Finally, Art said, “I can’t let you do that. He’s got Johnny in there, and he’s got a gun.”

“Where did he get it?”

“Johnny keeps one behind the counter for some reason. Now get back in your truck.”

Waite was not one to buck authority, but he could tell by Art’s general demeanor that he was as agitated as Tommy. Instead of moving to the truck, he veered toward the front door of the Feed and Seed with the deputies yelling behind him.

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Waite had been through so much loss in life; there had been so many things he couldn't change. But this felt different.

He turned with his hands out in supplication. "Let me talk with him, Art."

The deputy shook his head and pursed his lips. "It's your funeral."

He opened the screen door, and the springs squawked. "Tommy, it's Waite."

"He's got a gun!" Johnny yelled.

"I'm coming in," Waite said.

He stepped into the dimly lit store, and the aroma of sweet oats and fresh leather and sawdust and horehound candy overwhelmed him. He glanced at Tommy behind the counter and waved, like he saw this scene every day. He opened the top of the cooler and grabbed a Grape Nehi® bottle and opened it.

"Can I get you one, Tommy?" Waite said.

"I don't want nothing to drink. I just want to be treated like a human being. People around here don't know how to do that."

"Grape or orange?" Waite said.

"I told you I don't want nothing to drink."

Waite took a long draw and sighed, the fizz reaching his stomach. "Did you hang up on Ardell?"

Tommy's eyes darted, like he was trying to find a light switch in the dark.

Waite leaned against the cooler and crossed his feet in front of him. He took another long swig, the sweetness sliding down like a child giggling on a slide at the park.

"Tommy, when you called, I thought you were going to ask me to play some Eddy Arnold. Green apples and Indianapolis. How's your mama doing?"

A little spark in his eyes. "She's all right. Got the pleurisy."

"You tell her I said hello when you get home."

"She likes that Sunday show you do," Tommy said. His words came fast.

The program Tommy referred to was *Waite, on the Lord*, but most people didn't hear the comma.

He played Southern Gospel and Bluegrass and a mixture of hymns and gospel tunes and readings from the Bible.

"As I recall, you said she likes the Oak Ridge Boys."

Tommy gave Waite a slack-jawed stare. "Yeah, but not these new fellows. She liked them when Smitty Gatlin was singing lead. They were the Oak Ridge Quartet before they changed their name."

"I have a couple of those old records. I bet I could play one for her this week."

"She'd like that. She lost her brother a month ago. Uncle Homer."

"I read that in the *Dispatch*. I was real sorry to hear it."

Waite stepped closer to the counter, studying the dusty Zagnut® bars and hard candy. He picked up a package of Mallo® Cups. "Ever try these?"

"I don't do well with chocolate."

He put the candy back, and as if to say, "Stay calm," he gave a nod to Johnny who stood in the corner, pale and sweating profusely.

"You need to get out of here, Waite. I don't want to hurt you."

"I believe you, Tommy. I think that's why you called. Something got you agitated. Mixed up. That happens to all of us."

"I came for chicken feed. Johnny said we couldn't have no more credit."

Waite reached into his back pocket, and Tommy raised the gun. Slowly, Waite pulled out his wallet.

"How much is a sack of chicken feed now, Johnny? Will a \$20 cover it?"

"Yeah, that'll do," Johnny said.

Waite dropped the bill on the counter and grabbed a sack and threw it over his shoulder and walked toward the front door, as if willing Tommy to follow. He opened the door

with one hand and turned to see Tommy staring blankly.

"Well, come on. Chickens are hungry."

Tommy looked at the counter, then slowly placed the gun down, and ambled forward, stopping at the cooler.

"I think I will have one of those Orange Nehi drinks."

Waite nodded. "Put it on our tab, Johnny."

Tommy grabbed a bottle and opened it, and some of the orange dribbled down his beard.

"Your mama ever heard of Squire Parsons?" Waite said.

"He's got a song called 'Sweet Beulah Land' I think she'd like."

Waite put an arm around him, and they walked side by side into the sunlight.

He convinced the deputies to let Tommy finish his Nehi before they

cuffed him. And it struck him that what had just happened was the same thing he did on the radio. All most people needed was a friend who would reach out and calm them and tell them things were going to be OK. They needed to know whatever they were going through, they'd get through it together. ☺

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Note: Read more about Waite and others who live in Emmaus, West Virginia, in Chris Fabry's new heartwarming novel, *A Piece of the Moon*.

CHRIS FABRY is an award-winning author of more than 80 books, including his new novel, *A Piece of the Moon*, available now. If you have a dream to write, find encouragement at [heyyoucanwrite.com](http://heyyoucanwrite.com). Chris is also the host of Chris Fabry Live on Moody Radio.

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