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Mrs. Rosen at the End of the World

Riverside, Connecticut. December 22nd, 1999.

Anne Rosen, seventy, stepped out of her house a few minutes before sunset and readied herself for the arrival of the sound. She stood in her snow-covered backyard, wearing her heavy coat and a crocheted shawl draped over her head and shoulders. As the sky blushed through the leafless and frost-covered trees, the sound came to her; it rose ringing in her ears. As it had since it first found her three months ago, the sound held its maximum volume for a minute or so, no longer, then faded rapidly into silence, leaving Anne alone and in the dark.

She regretted telling her daughter about the sound. More so, Anne regretted telling Mina that this sound reminded her of a train horn. She should have said that it was more of a *tone*. Like a hearing test, but musical. The depression of a middle key on an electric organ. Flat but full, once the sound reached its absolute volume it never wavered, never changed pitch.

When she first heard the sound late in September, when the trees were still green and gold, Anne was frightened. She thought she was having a stroke. When it came to her at the same time three evenings in a row, she became convinced the sound was a symptom, a bodeful omen of her final decline. But after months of its nightly emergence, Anne came to feel an affinity, as if she, the sound, and the crepuscular moment they shared at each day's end were three conspirators in the hasteless pursuit of an unfinished mystery. Really, the sound was almost pretty.

Anne flinched as a dog barked violently, close to her, gnashing and growling somewhere behind the snow-capped fence line, shattering her still-warm memory of the sound. It must have been the brindle pit bull she'd lately seen loose in the neighborhood, menacing cats and probably children. The dog barked again, snarling, raking the fence with its nails. It could smell Anne, trying to break through, to get to her. She searched the perimeter of her fence line for the hulking shape of a dog passing behind the zoetropic slits between pickets, but it was impossible to see clearly in the pooling darkness. The dog kept barking, ferociously now, the sound so close that it could only be coming from her closest neighbors, the Nyes, exactly the type of people who would interrupt the euthanasia of a full-grown hellhound at the Animal Shelter and consider it a good deed. The pit bull bayed and bristled. She could hear it pacing in the snow, searching for a weak spot in the fence. Anne

retreated into the house as quickly as her hip would allow.

Inside, she turned from locking the sliding door and was startled to find she had a guest. He had seated himself in front of her television, watching a documentary on the Soviet lunar landing. Anne looked over his shoulder to the familiar grainy footage. Alexei Leonov, first man on the moon. Cut to color, John F. Kennedy brought out of retirement to stand beside President Agnew at the memorial service for the Apollo 11 astronauts. Stone-faced, Agnew is sidling away from the former president, as if to deflect Kennedy's culpability.

"Can I help you?" Anne asked the man watching her television.

He turned and she could see his face, rinsed by the bottled blue of a thirty-year-old sky. Anne gasped, her hand racing up to her throat. When she could speak, she asked him if this is it. If she is finally dead. She was still wearing her coat and shawl. He smiled and asked her for a cup of coffee.

The following night, hours after Anne was again visited by the sound, she sat at her desk before the humming Selectric, its tan body glowing in the golden light of a green-shaded desk lamp. She thought, *Light is both a wave and a particle*. She'd taken half of a Dilaudid for her hip, and could now feel the fresh influx of opioids swimming through her brain. The drone of the typewriter seemed to grow louder. Had it changed pitch? Anne's fingertips rested on the desk beneath the plastic keys.

Anne had told her daughter that she was writing again, working late into the night, putting her sleepless hours to use, but this was only partially true. Mainly Anne had been making lists of dates and places, testing the outer boundaries of her unsubmissive memory, seeking a point of entry. No characters had emerged. Nothing resembling a story would materialize for more than an instant. Every time she leaned forward to strike the first key, to write something that might become something, she had to pause, as if holding the receiver of a telephone after hearing the breathy "Hello?" of the other party, forgetting whom it was she had dialed.

Anne switched off the typewriter, halting its vibration. She could hear muffled laughter and music from the Christmas party next door, at the Nyes'. The sedative baritone of Perry Como. *Oh, there's no place like hommmme for the holidays*. Anne stood, carefully favoring her right hip, and pushed her chair away from the desk. She walked into her dark kitchen, to the window above the sink. As soon as Anne parted the curtains, the music stopped. She watched Sharon Nye appear in the alley between their houses, wearing a long and black wool coat and rabbit skin hat, carrying an armload of liquor bottles which she dropped crashing into a dented trashcan while illuminated in the overlapping headlights of her departing guests. Sharon staggered slightly as she walked back to her front door, her long, multiple silhouettes liting against the side of her house, ignoring her monster pit bull, who yawped in alarm, from somewhere in the darkness.

The Nyes threw parties for every imaginable occasion, yet Anne had never been to any. Sharon and Ben Nye were in their late fifties, still working, but not so much younger

than Anne that an invitation would have been unthinkable. She and Harry had been invited to a party at the Nyes' once, years ago, but that was the week Harry started chemotherapy, and then, well. Harry had suddenly craved nothing so much as privacy. Anne had declined politely, but didn't bother to explain. There'd been no more invitations after that. Even after Harry passed, Anne wasn't particularly wounded by her omission from the controlled explosions of the Nyes' revelry, which occurred so frequently that one party seemed to echo the other. She was dependable for brief, witty repartee with strangers, but sustained small talk had always left her spent and flagging.

Sharon and Ben came to the small gathering Anne held after Harry's funeral. They brought her a lasagna in Pyrex and stayed for a second cup of coffee. That was as close as they'd ever come to one hosting the other.

Her exact words to Mina had been, "It's like a train horn, I guess. First soft and distant, then drawing near." This was a Saturday morning, shortly after her daughter had arrived wearing a knit sweater, blue with white reindeer whose antlers only accidentally resembled menorahs. Mina had brought a pink box of lemon cakes. As always, her daughter's gray, unsearching eyes were steeled for their weekend ritual—tidying up, vacuuming, opening bills, Mina interrogating her mother about her diet and sleep. Anne mentioned the sound as small talk really, not bothering to describe the beauty of it to her thirty-eight-year-old daughter, engaging in a form of self-censorship that had become second nature after decades of misfired attempts at meaningful conversation. She looked up to see her daughter standing perfectly still, as if trapped in amber.

"I'll make an appointment with Dr. Bodner," Mina said, closing the cake box. She wiped a crumb from the corner of her mouth and pulled her knit sweater back down from where it had begun to climb the rise of her stomach.

In the late morning of New Year's Eve, Anne sat in one of Dr. Bodner's two examination rooms. She scrutinized a painting of mallards flying over what appeared to be Chesapeake Bay. The walls of the examination room were thin and as she waited Anne could hear Sylvie, the heavy-breasted Haitian nurse, enter the next room and greet a patient. Silence for a moment, then the tinny *gong* as the metal lid of a foot-operated trashcan hit the wall. She heard the patient in the next room complaining about her cataracts, her hemorrhoids, her husband's gout.

Anne and Mina had driven to Dr. Bodner's office in Anne's 1976 Chevrolet Caprice. The tightness and inflammation in Anne's hip had worsened with winter, making it painful to climb in and out of Mina's little Honda. On the drive to Greenwich they listened to a discussion program on public radio, the host describing potential effects of the looming computer crisis everyone abbreviated to "Y2K." People were worried computers everywhere would fail as soon as they clicked over into the year 2000. Traffic signals would go haywire. Commuter trains would switch tracks and collide. Credit cards would become useless pieces

of plastic. A new spin on the Ten Plagues of Passover. Or, maybe, nothing would happen. Maybe the lights would stay on. The looming crisis smacked of hubris, although no less audacious than numbering years to begin with, of pronouncing, "This year is one. The next is two. Then three." And so on.

"Won't we know anyway, in just a few hours," Mina said, "when it turns midnight in England? In, you know, the other Greenwich?"

"You're thinking of the Prime Meridian," Anne said. "The new day starts in the Pacific. In Japan, today is already tomorrow."

Mina glanced at the rearview mirror and asked, "Are you sure about that?"

Anne had long felt her failure to achieve closeness with her daughter was due to more than just Mina's anti-intellectualism—or as Anne had once tried to phrase it diplomatically, Mina's *absence of curiosity*. Anne faulted Mina's inability to think in German or Dutch. Throughout Mina's childhood, Anne had labored to teach her daughter a few words and phrases, but at fourteen Mina had declared the two languages to be as ugly to her ear as they were indistinguishable. Harry had declined to intercede. He was born in America, and spoke only English and a moldered, occasional Hebrew. For him, other people's languages were just another headache of going abroad. By high school Mina had begun to wear a beret and soon absconded into the nasal ecologies of French. No one thought to check her spirits when she announced her ambition to become a dancer. Back then Mina had been pretty, dark and lithe, and not altogether graceless. Anne felt her daughter deserved the benefit of the doubt, something Anne's own mother had never bothered to concede.

Sylvie came in and took Anne's temperature, her pulse, her blood pressure. She told Anne that Dr. Bodner would be in to see her shortly. Only a moment passed after she left before the doctor knocked on the exam room door and let himself in. "Hello, Mrs. Rosen. How are we today?"

Dr. Bodner was a middle-aged general practitioner who specialized in the numberless effects of aging. He ran a busy office thanks largely to word of mouth at Temple Sholom and Shir Ami. He was short and soft-shouldered, with small feet and a graying beard. Dark hairs like searching tentacles grew from his ears and he kept his eyebrows and beard untrimmed. His mouth was nearly invisible, so that when he spoke he seemed like a ventriloquist's doll, his voice not his but thrown from some other, veiled source—the glass jar of cotton swabs, or the laminated diagram of the circulatory system thumb-tacked to the wall. After he listened to Anne's breathing and tested the strength of her grip, he asked, "Any dizziness, nausea, shortness of breath?"

"No. Nothing like that at all."

Her arm still felt the alarming clench of Sylvie's blood pressure cuff. Dr. Bodner blinded her with the soul-burning glare of the ophthalmoscope, and as she waited for her vision to return, he slid the cool tip of an otoscope into her ear. She heard the insistent burrowing, felt her earwax rearrange. "Tell me about this sound," he said quickly, with a degree of strain not present when he asked about, say, the firmness of her stool.

Anne blinked. She tried to offer a more accurate description than the one she had given Mina. “It comes every day at the same time. Just as the sun sets. It’s a ringing, I guess. But not shrill. At first it’s low, quiet, then it’s all I can hear. And then it’s gone.” She felt sheepish, as if describing her own invention.

“Does it cause you pain, or discomfort?”

Anne almost laughed. “No. Not at all.” *Quite the opposite*, she nearly added.

Dr. Bodner smiled and said, “Okay, Mrs. Rosen. Your ears look good and your hearing test was normal, so I think we can rule out tinnitus.”

“So, what is it then?”

Bodner sighed as he sat on his squat, black vinyl stool, forcing him to look up at Anne. “I think what you’re having is some kind of auditory hallucination. Don’t be frightened, but the fact that you only hear this ‘train sound’ at dusk is a pretty clear indication it’s not a type of seizure, either.”

“It’s not a train sound,” she said, realizing he’d conferred with Mina. “And I’m not frightened.”

Bodner may have smiled. She couldn’t be certain. “Tell me,” he said, “what did your parents die of?”

“My father died of lung cancer. My mother had several strokes. Five, I think.”

Bodner glanced down to where his hands held the otoscope between his knees. “Have you had any other symptoms—confusion, mood swings, difficulty speaking, loss of time or memory?”

“No, not that I’m aware of,” she replied.

Bodner ignored the joke. “Mrs. Rosen,” he asked, “Have you ever heard of Sundowner Syndrome?”

She shook her head. “Is that—you know. Alzheimer’s?”

“No,” Bodner said. “Though the two are often confused. Likely, this is just the onset of the normal decline we’d expect to see in a woman your age, or thereabouts. Though your mother’s history of strokes is something we ought to take note of.”

We. Anne bristled at Dr. Bodner’s use of the first person plural. Did he mean her and himself, or he and some body of medical experts, hidden discreetly behind the wall?

He asked if anything else strange or inexplicable had been happening to her. Especially around evening. Anne shook her head. She never should have told anyone about the sound.

“Well, that’s good,” he said. Then he shrugged. “If the sound doesn’t bother you, don’t give it too much thought.”

“I don’t,” Anne said, too quickly.

After he left, she heard Bodner talking to Mina in the hall. Anne wondered if no one had ever mentioned to him the scandalous thinness of his walls.

“Ms. Rosen, is your mother a survivor?”

“A what?”

“I saw she has no tattoo—”

“Oh. Well, she had to go into hiding, but she was never in a camp. One of the lucky ones, I guess.”

“When she said she was hearing a ‘train horn,’ I assumed—”

“Do you think it’s—what’s that thing. Survivor’s guilt?”

Anne’s eyes moved from the mallards taking flight over the Chesapeake to another painting, this one of a field-coated hunter, his back to the viewer, trudging through an icy marsh, a felled grouse in one hand, his rifle in the other. Behind him, a black Labrador bounded through reeds and icy mush. Dr. Bodner was a bird hunter, he’d mentioned on several occasions. Between the paintings hung a photograph of Bodner holding up a sniped duck for the camera, a smiling Irish setter at his side. A Jewish hunter. If you say so.

“Any other complaints or distress?” Bodner’s voice was louder now. They must have moved closer to the door.

Mina said, “My mother wouldn’t complain if she stepped in a bear trap.”

His-and-hers laughter. Even the Irish setter seemed to chide her from his fixture on the wall. Normal decline. Predictable, foreseeable, unavoidable decline. She could write a story. *Death by Installments*. No, someone’s already done that.

Anne flinched at the sound of Dr. Bodner’s knuckles rapping on the door. He stepped inside, followed by Mina.

“Mrs. Rosen, I’ve told your daughter that I think it would be best if you stick to the same ritual everyday, waking at sunrise and going to bed before twilight. Follow your circadian rhythm. Get lots and lots of rest. Avoid this sound altogether.”

Anne said, “My mind is clearer in the evening.”

Mina said, “I don’t know if she’ll do that. She works on her new book all night. She drinks more coffee than I did in college.”

“You write?” Bodner asked, his bushy eyebrows arched with surprised. “Did I know this? I knew you were a school teacher, before.”

“She was,” Mina said. “Elementary.”

“I don’t drink that much coffee,” Anne said.

“Yes, she does,” Mina said to Bodner. “When I visit I find half-full mugs of cold coffee in the living room. On the sideboard, on the mantle. Sometimes I swear she’s been having people over.”

“No one’s coming over,” Anne was about to say, when Bodner said, “Open, please,” and stuck a tongue depressor into her mouth. He appraised what he saw. “Good,” he said. “Well, definitely cut back on the caffeine. That’s not helping.” Bodner stood and threw away the depressor. He gave Anne an expression of concern, one mostly hidden by his beard. “Get your rest. At your age, little things count for a lot.”

Anne straightened her back and shifted on the edge of the exam table, making the paper cover crinkle beneath her. “So simple,” she said. “If I sleep forever, I’ll never die.”

Bodner laughed. “Now that’s the kind of moxie we like to see in our patients,” he

said, washing his hands with his back to her. He dropped a fistful or paper towels into the metal trashcan, punctuating the waiting depressor. He smiled as he crouched before Anne, bringing his eyes level with hers. He began touching her head and neck with both hands, his fingers gently pressing on her throat, then behind her ears. His breath smelled of mint chewing gum. He asked, "If I may ask, what kind of book is it?"

Mina cleared her throat. "Another collection of stories, probably," she said. "Mom was a fiction writer, in another life."

"Oh?" Bodner said, staring into Anne's pupils. "What're your new stories about?"

"I don't know," Mina said. "She won't tell me."

"It's a novel," Anne said. "Or maybe I just think it is. It might be something else." She waited for one of them to reply, but neither spoke. Bodner kept prodding her, kept searching her eyes as Mina watched. Anne began to wonder if she'd actually spoken these words aloud.

White Christmas lights still spiraled up the trunks of the trees along Putnam Avenue, and hung from bare branches in shallow, crestfallen arcs above the street. The roads had iced over while they were at the doctor's office, so Mina drove slowly, her mittened hands at ten and two. Plowed snow lay piled and dirty in the gutters, like crumpled paper singed at the edges. A man's voice came through the Chevy's speakers. He was calling in from Silicon Valley to announce that all the important reprogramming had been completed, worldwide, and assured the host that everything would be fine. He sounded tired and satisfied, as if he had done all of this work himself. The host mentioned that it had already been the New Year in East Asia for hours, with no report of major problems. If Mina heard this, she didn't say anything.

"It's Friday, Mom," Mina said.

"I'm aware."

"Do you want me to take you to temple?"

"No," Anne said. "Another time."

"You skipped Chanukah. A lot of people would be happy to see you."

Anne knew the sound would find her wherever she was, but would its visitation be the same, in the golden light of her warm and crowded synagogue? Would the sound be angry with her, if it had to compete with the cantor? And then there was the question of the others. What would they think of Anne as they saw her overcome by a sound that did not reverberate within their own, unsuspecting skulls? She had no idea what she looked like during the visitations, if she swayed, if she hummed, if she spoke the embarrassing truths of a patient emerging from general anesthesia.

The rufous and tawny bricks of the low storefronts on Putnam Avenue looked humble and warm behind the leafless trees and the low, dark clouds, pregnant with more snow. Pedestrians crisscrossed the street from one store to another, jaywalking to return unbidden Christmas presents. Mina let the Caprice decelerate and said, "Dr. Bodner wants

you to start going to bed earlier."

"I was there," Anne said.

"Do you think you could work in the mornings instead?"

Anne said, "My mind is clearer in the evenings."

"I know, Mom. Just think about it."

"Mina. I don't have this Sunset Disease."

"Okay, Mom."

The radio host said the whole problem started in the 1930s, when computers were fed and regurgitated paper punch cards. There was so little room for data, coders translated the numbered years from four digits into two, not foreseeing a day when, in the absence of a prefix, the suffix would lose its register.

Where was Anne, when those cards were being punched? She was still a little girl. Had her family already moved from Frankfurt to Holland? Was she in school yet? Was Hindenburg still alive? Had Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia? Anne struggled to arrange the dates in her mind.

By the summer of 1942, shortly after Anne turned thirteen, her family were fugitives. Like thousands of European Jews who survived, they had hidden behind their walls, dissolving into the architecture. During the day Anne crept slowly in stocking feet, spoke in a hushed voice, squatted over a basin inlaid with old newspapers so she could urinate as quietly as possible. Her family and a few close relations had concealed themselves in the middle of the city for three hundred and sixty-four days, like discreet, overly heedful ghosts, slinking behind blackout curtains and secret doorways, unobtrusive to the point of erasure, kept in food and tobacco by benevolent gentiles whose faces were less angelic than hardened by something they would later describe as their normal human duty.

Mina turned off of Putnam and the Chevy picked up speed as they coursed down a wooded stretch of the turnpike. Anne saw the Nye's brindle pit bull trot out onto the asphalt, a dark shape framed by a dingy snow bank. What was it doing so far from home? Mina must have seen the dog, but she didn't press the brake pedal. Anne assumed Mina was trying to avoid sliding on the icy road, that she was correcting their bearing so gradually that her adjustments were imperceptible. But the dog, now half in their lane, rushed nearer and nearer. One of Anne's hands shot to the dashboard, her other hand gripped the stitched vinyl handle of the door. She could barely gather enough breath to exclaim, "Mina, watch out!" But it was too late. In the last moment before impact the pit bull leapt, not away but toward the car, and Anne heard a sickening *thunk* as the poor thing was struck by the fender, its limp body caroming into dirty snow.

"What?!" Mina cried.

"You just hit a *dog*, that's what!" Anne twisted in her seat, trying to look behind her.

"The Nyes' dog!"

"Oh my god!"

Mina slammed on the brakes, and they slid fishtailing down the road. Mina managed