

Benjamin Reed

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

to keep them on the asphalt as other cars blew by, their horns wailing and furious. Already sobbing, Mina pulled onto the shoulder and looked in the rearview mirror. “I don’t see it!”

Anne’s heart pounded in her chest. “I think you knocked it into the ditch,” she said. Mina breathed wetly, her chest rising and falling, bisected by her seatbelt.

“Turn around,” Anne said.

“What? Why?”

“Because, Mina. We need to see if it’s still alive.”

The Chevy’s tires slipped before they found purchase, and Mina hesitantly rejoined the traffic. They made three passes, but were unable to find any sign, not even a trace of blood in the snow.

As Mina pulled into the driveway between their houses, Anne saw Ben Nye smoking a cigarette. He was sweeping snow from his front walk, scattering rock salt in his wake. He wore a green flannel jacket and a gray woolen hat, his khaki pants crammed into rubber boots. He waved to them, then paused to stretch his back. His face was raw from the cold and vapor trailed continuously from his mouth. Anne opened her door and Ben straightened his body, calling out, “Hello, ladies!”

“Hi, Ben,” Anne said, too quietly, as she stepped out of the car, steadying herself against the open door. She wondered how to tell him.

“Do you need a hand?” Ben dropped his broom and came crunching through the snow. His glasses were fogged over.

“No, thank you. Mina can manage.”

“Okay,” he said, stopping to snuff out his cigarette. “Hello, Mina. Happy holidays.”

Mina slammed her door. “Hello, Mr. Nye. Happy holidays.”

Ben waited for Anne to close her door, then stuck his thumb over his shoulder, at his house. “Sharon and I are having a little New Year’s get-together tonight. We wanted to invite the two of you,” he said, oblivious to Mina’s red eyes and tear-slackened face, to the stiffness with which Anne probed her frozen driveway with the toe of her shoe.

“That sounds lovely, Ben,” Anne said, trying not to wince.

They hadn’t been able to locate the body of the dog. Mina had said it was probably fine, it was just scared, and look: there isn’t any damage to the car. But Anne knew better. She was sure Mina had killed it. That the poor beast had pulled itself by its forelegs to die in some private hollow, white bubbles frothing from its nostrils, its body crushed like a cardboard box.

“Ben,” Anne said, her jaw quivering in the cold, “There’s something I have to tell you.”

Ben cocked his head, still smiling. “Oh? What is it?”

“She can’t come to your party, Mr. Nye,” Mina said, staring at her mother. “She needs to rest. Doctor’s orders.”

“Oh, well that’s a pity,” Ben said. “Maybe you can join us then, Mina? Things are

getting started around nine.”

“I live in the City,” Mina said, slinging her purse over her shoulder, taking her mother’s elbow in her hand. “But thanks.”

Anne limped toward Ben, refusing to let her daughter turn her toward the house. She pulled her arm free from Mina and leaned against the Chevy’s fender. “Thank you for the invitation, Ben,” she said. “I’ll see how I’m feeling come—nine?”

“Y-yes,” he said, hesitating in the crosscurrent between mother and daughter. “Feel free to swing by, even if it’s only for a moment.” He gave a nervous wink to Mina. “And do call if we’re too loud.”

For once it was impossible to get Mina to leave. She lingered, asking her mother questions, offering to vacuum the hallway, to flip Anne’s mattress and do the laundry. Anne pretended to consider each of these offers before declining, watching the clock hands tick past four, the light from outside growing dimmer and more gray.

When Mina was finally gone Anne sat at her desk and turned on the lamp, then the Selectric. She opened the top drawer, where she kept her Dilaudid. She used the point of her letter opener to break a tablet in half, then paused to regard the broken pieces in her palm, the fine white grains. She listened to the hum of the typewriter and stared at the empty sheet of paper. She swallowed both halves of the tablet, and rose to get her coat and shawl. She walked outside and stood in her back yard. As the light faded she heard the sound, faint at first, yet growing, as if far away but rapidly approaching. The sound rose and gradually filled her with gentle droning, the ceaseless turning of a drum in a great motor. As the tone grew louder, it became a warm, golden thing. A gentle invitation. She closed her eyes, and for a moment she was floating, lifted ever so slightly from the earth. As the sound began to fade, she returned to the frozen ground, her eyes open, feeling small and alone under the wet ink of early evening, as if a train truly had passed without stopping to collect her.

Back inside, Anne found that her guest had returned. He was standing in her office, sitting at her humming typewriter, regarding the empty sheet of paper.

“Hello, Harry,” she said.

“Hello, sweetie,” he said, turning to face her, his face golden and radiant in the light from her lamp. She wondered why he wasn’t bundled for the cold. Had he not come from outside? He wore only his usual attire: navy blue polyester pants, a short-sleeved shirt with his glasses case clipped over the edge of the breast pocket, his shoulders hunched beneath his tan coat, the one with the plaid lining, the one Mina had given to the Goodwill in Bridgeport. Harry nodded at the blank sheet coiled around the platen of the electric typewriter. “Writer’s block?”

“Mina killed the Nyes’ dog,” Anne said.

Harry gave her a strange expression. “The Nyes don’t have a dog,” he said.

“They do,” she said, woozing from the painkillers. She leaned against the doorframe. “Or did, rather. A pit bull. A real menace. Not to speak ill of the dead. I’m sure he was loved.”

“That’s funny,” Harry said.

“What?”

“I would have sworn the Nyes were cat people.”

Anne began writing fiction shortly after she married Harry. Originally, she just wrote a few short, humorous little scenes to get a laugh out of Harry, and then a couple of the teachers she was friendly with at school. It was they who first convinced her to send her stories to magazines, but Harry had always been her staunchest supporter, had bullied her, really, into believing in herself throughout years of opening their mailbox to find manila envelopes addressed in her own hand. Finally, she placed a short story in a magazine. Then another. Then she had stories out in two literary journals at once. In 1987, a small New York publishing house called Old Amsterdam paid her a thousand-dollar advance for her collection, *The Pebbles of Gibraltar and Other Stories*. Anne didn’t want the jacket to mention that she was a schoolteacher and a “Holocaust survivor,” because the latter wasn’t technically true, at least not in her mind, but Max Erndt, the publisher, had insisted.

Her collection was published into a seemingly fortuitous environment. A sea of Holocaust narratives had washed up into bookstores and cinemas—*Schindler’s Ark*, *The White Hotel*, *Sophie’s Choice*. But Anne’s stories were strange—“highly imaginative” as declaimed by the jacket’s sole blurb, penned by another Old Amsterdam author whom Anne had never met—and only a few of them were even elliptically related to the Holocaust or the war. Max, who kept a paper-strewn office in the Village, far from the midtown publishers, said not to worry, her collection had “dark horse best-seller written all over it.” He was in talks, he said, with Hollywood screenwriters. Anne had been buoyed by his cynicism, the dollar signs in his eyes, but most critics at larger papers declined to review her book, and those who did offered terse, glancing praise before describing her stories as “incomprehensibly surreal,” or “anachronistically avant-garde.” Her collection survived to see a second printing, but few of those copies ever sold. There were boxes of remainders in her basement, waiting for a flood.

Anne had never considered literary success a possibility when she first started writing, yet found herself in a funk once it eluded her. She only began writing again after Harry died. Mina was guardedly supportive of something she saw as therapeutic, but Anne simply didn’t know what else to do with her time. And, as always, it was the stories that had come to *her*, in compelling but unfinished scenes, and half-heard snatches of voice, not the other way around.

The first idea she had was for a story about time travelers who wanted to see dinosaurs. The time travelers had the best technology, but failed to factor in the expansion of the universe. When they arrived in the Cretaceous, the time travelers’ bodies were so large their steps leveled hillsides. Their heads were so high in the clouds they could scarcely breathe. They tried to return to their own time, but in their haste they overshot their mark, and ended up far in the future, where the time travelers were now so small, future earthlings

treated them as children, and the dinosaurs they’d brought with them as curious pets. Anne let Mina read an early draft. When her daughter had finished she asked, “But why don’t the time travelers just go home, to their own time?”

Anne couldn’t summon the energy to explain to Mina that the story wasn’t really *about* time travel. It was about the wondrous incomprehensibility of life, the absurd dearth of language at our disposal to describe eternity, immortality, and the facelessness of the Divine. How the best we can do is shrink our sense of time and space, which inevitably fails us, because we cannot render the universe into a manageable idea without also magnifying our own significance.

Still bruised by the failure (what else to call it?) of her book, Anne only sent the dinosaur story to one magazine, a small and self-deprecating journal from Brooklyn called *Macro-Fiche*. They published fiction alongside anarchist manifestos and black and white photographs of semi nude transvestites. Anne had seen a teenage girl with pink hair and a pierced nostril reading their first issue in the magazine section of the Greenwich Library. Anne waited for the girl to leave before picking up the issue and reading its three short stories. A week or so later she mailed them a Xeroxed copy of “The Shrinking Monsters,” hoping to receive some criticism, and was surprised when the editor called her at home to offer Anne an enthusiastic acceptance, practically shouting into the phone that Anne’s story was “the coolest shit we’ve received in a while.” Not long after Anne received a check for fifty dollars and her contributor copies, she was telephoned by a woman named Laura Hansen.

“I’m calling for Anne Frank.”

“This is she,” Anne said, knowing the call was about her writing, as she had only ever published under her maiden name. “Wait. I’m sorry—Laura Hansen? Your name sounds familiar.”

“I was one of Max’s editors at Old Amsterdam,” the voice said. “Though when we met I was just a proofreader. *Pebbles of Gibraltar* was the first book I worked on.”

“Oh, yes,” Anne said into the phone, and before her she saw the image of a bashful, milk-white college girl in an empty blouse and too much lipstick, not more than twenty, a forgotten and underpaid little thing who haunted Max’s office like an afterthought.

“I’m at Tate & Hill now.”

Anne didn’t know the name. “Is that a new publisher?”

“No, we’re an agency.”

“Oh.”

“I read your story in *Macro-Fiche*. I must say, I was a little surprised to see your work there. What did you think of Ellen?”

“Who?”

“Ellen Graf. Their editor?”

“Oh, she was very nice. Very—I don’t know. Bohemian.”

A laugh came through the phone.

Anne said, “I guess people don’t use that word anymore.”

“No, no,” Laura said. Anne could tell from her voice that she was still smiling. “Now we say ‘transgressive,’ but yes, I think ‘Bohemian’ also fits.” Anne heard a rustle. Laura must have moved the receiver from one ear to the other. “I was wondering,” Laura continued, “Are you working on anything else right now?”

And so, last October, when the sound had only been visiting Anne for a month, she took the train into Manhattan to meet Laura Hansen at her office on Seventh Avenue. As she emerged from the subway station beneath Times Square, Anne was subsumed by the crowd and car-horn riot of a drizzling afternoon. She clenched the bone handles of her purse in one hand, her umbrella in the other.

Anne remembered Manhattan in 1950. In those days she’d walked the city with a knot in the bottom of her throat, a ceaseless tightening that refused to abate, unloosened by seltzer or whiskey. She worked in a steno pool, translating shorthand into type, but when confronted by strangers on the street she smiled and shook her head, pretending not to understand them. Anne felt contained by something heavy and pressing, even when naked in the bath, and when she looked in the mirror she saw a white body and a hardened, angular face that no longer belonged to her.

Her father had been treated fairly by the Dutch reparations council, and unlike many dispossessed immigrants her parents were able to buy a nice home out in Sheepshead Bay, a house of gleaming hardwood floors and mahogany lintels that she only visited for holidays and special dinners. Despite the house’s factual tangibility, it felt insubstantial to her—or perhaps she felt intangible while inside it. Regardless, she refused to spend the night there, if she could avoid it.

So much in America felt strange and unreal, inviting Anne to see her own life through the eyes of an impartial observer, a narcotic effect that saturated her present so fully, it bled into her past. She was twenty when she came to New York—or was she twenty-one? In any case, she still felt like a girl, and knew even in the moment that she saw the world as a girl would, taking as fact the impossibility that a segment of her life had been surgically removed, reducing her sum.

When Anne thought back on her year in hiding, even on her childhood before the war, it was as if it had happened to someone else, something she’d read in a book that she’d misplaced before reaching the end. On visits to her parents’ house in Brooklyn Anne’s mother would ladle chicken broth and matzo balls into saucers and ask her if she remembered the baker who kept a stall on the Westermarkt, and how the pastries in Brooklyn didn’t compare to the cherry tarts and *oliebollen* he’d sell for half-price after noon. Or her mother would ask if Anne recalled the Turk who sold the Persian rugs, the toymaker and his mechanical cars, key-cranked Citroëns and Mercedes. Anne would nod, absently. Amsterdam. Her memories of the cobbled streets and green canals were so vague and shifting, they felt unreliable, something swallowed by an unseasonable brume, as if she had only dwelt there briefly, in another state of being.

Laura Hansen was taller than Anne remembered. She had transformed into a

confident, beautiful woman in a finely-tailored gray pantsuit, expensive pearls, and a paisley scarf knotted across her shoulders. She commanded a wide desk bordered by merlons of stacked manuscripts. They talked about Max Erndt, and how once he found out Anne had kept a diary during the German occupation of the Netherlands, he relentlessly pressed her to adapt it into an autobiography. At first Anne assumed Laura brought this up as conversation, but the diary turned out to be the reason Laura had phoned her in the first place. An hour later Anne left the agency’s office feeling even emptier than when she had arrived. She had agreed to go over her “war diaries,” as Laura had referred to them, to “see if something might be there.”

Outside, on a rainy Seventh Avenue, Anne shivered and watched young women vault from the sidewalk into the wet street, bounding over their blurred reflections, never pausing to register the height of the curb, nor bothering to make sure the ground was still waiting below.

On the night of New Year’s Eve, Anne stood in her dim bedroom, wearing only a slip and bra, having second thoughts. Harry watched from the foot of their bed as she finally stepped into her skirt. It was olive green, with a black border on the hem, wool but soft. She zipped her skirt and laced her arms through the sleeves of a white blouse, then the coat that matched the skirt.

“I always loved that little number,” Harry said.

“It’s not a ‘number,’ Harry,” Anne said. “Little, or otherwise. It’s elegant. And you should. You bought it for me.”

She watched his reflection as he smiled. His face was smoother than she remembered. “Tell me something, sweetheart,” he said.

Anne spritzed her neck with a crystal bottle of perfume. “Tell you what?”

“Why won’t you write from your diary? Is your memory so good, you don’t need it?”

Anne pursed the clip of one pearl earring onto her earlobe, and paused, holding the other. She said, “I find memoir suspect, as a genre.”

Harry lay back on the bedspread. He scooped himself up the bed, like an inchworm, not ruffling the duvet. He sat up again, reclining against the tufted headboard. “Why did you keep a diary in the first place?”

Anne felt her stockinged feet sink into the carpet. “It was a gift. Not even my idea. And everyone kept a diary, in those days.”

Harry fingered the limp corner of a pillowcase. He said, “You were just following orders.”

“Don’t be vile.” Anne clipped the second earring to her other ear and stepped into her shoes. The painkiller was working, and she felt the soft throbbing of her hip the way one might consider a house fire from a great distance. She sighed. “At first I was just lonely. I’ve told you how lonely I get sometimes. Especially in crowded rooms.”

“She says, as she gets ready for a party.”

“Don’t make me feel guilty, Hare.”

“I’m sorry. I’m happy you’re going.” Harry interlaced his fingers and rested his hands on his belly. “But just this then: Why’d you keep writing, after you went into hiding?”

Anne tugged on the bottom of her jacket. “You know why.”

“I like to hear old stories.”

Anne sighed again. She felt tired. She considered undressing and getting into bed. “It was a form of survival. We knew what was happening. In Germany, in Poland. Even if we couldn’t know the whole horror of it, factually.” The way a school of fish know a shark is near, she thought, when only the peripheral eyes can see the shadow’s approach. “There was the idea I might vanish, and I wanted some piece of me to survive. You can’t understand because—”

“I wasn’t there, I know. But you *didn’t* vanish.”

Anne brushed her hair with force. “*Exactly*. What’s the point of putting yourself into a book, if you know that in the morning the sun will rise and you’ll still be around? It’d be embarrassing, having to live in the same world as your own facsimile.” Anne arranged her gray hair and thought of the old thing about showing up at a party where another woman is wearing the same dress. What if you showed up to a party, and found that you were already there?

Harry made a strange face, reversed by the vanity mirror. “How many more mornings do you expect to have?”

“You know what I mean. The world isn’t ending.”

“Oh, but it *could* end. Tonight. Isn’t that why you’re going to a party? Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do, at the—”

“It’s not the end, Hare. People aren’t terrified they’re going to get shot or blown up. That their children will be taken from them.” Anne slipped her wedding ring onto her finger. The simulated diamond shimmered blue. It had been Harry’s mother’s, never worth very much in her lifetime, though Anne had been told the stone had lately become valuable, synthetic or not, because the process by which it was made had been abandoned, replaced by less expensive systems that produced more lustrous imitations. “They’re not even terrified of losing their money, their savings. Safeguards are built in for money. There’s always a paper trail. No. What people are scared of is the cable TV not working. They’re worried about computers, of all damn things.”

“They’ve externalized their memories. Copied themselves onto machines and floppy disks. And now it all might get swallowed.”

“Well,” Anne said, “that’s progress for you.”

“Amnesia is progress?”

Anne turned and glared at Harry. Then she hesitated. In the mirror’s reflection he had seemed clear. Definite. Now, staring directly at him in the dim light of their bedroom, he was strangely hard to see, vague and unfocused, as if she was wearing another person’s glasses. Anne realized that she couldn’t tell how much of his face she was seeing with her

eyes, and how much of it was a mosaic of her memories. She said, “It has not been my experience, precisely, that people collect and concentrate a thing in order to protect it.”

“Oh, Anneliese. Now who’s being vile?”

Anne turned back to her vanity. She shifted her skirt, feeling the wool slide smoothly over the silk of her slip. Because it was the week of the anniversary, she thought of Alexei Leonov, the Russian cosmonaut, the First Man on the Moon after the American lunar shot fell flaming into the sea, never breaching the blue lens of the atmosphere. Anne was going to a party for the first time in a decade, and she couldn’t decide to whom she was more akin, Leonov, or the doomed Americans. What were their names?

Anne opened her jewelry box and lifted her necklace of freshwater pearls. It hung from her hand as she regarded herself in the vanity mirror. She looked ancient, she knew, but hoped it was in the way old things become precious, not in spite of but because of their uselessness.

Anne held the pearls to her chest. To Harry she said, “Help me with my necklace. My fingers can’t work the clasp when I’m on these pills.”

Harry stood and approached her. She watched him grow larger in the mirror. He became clear again, focused, as young as fifty-five, unwasted by the chemical transfusion meant to save him. She closed her eyes. She could feel the dim pulse of him standing behind her. She could feel his cool breath on the skin behind her ear.

Harry said, “All I want to know is, what will happen to your diary, once you disappear?”

Anne kept her eyes closed. She shrugged. “Mina will inherit it. Now please. Clasp my pearls, would you?”

“And if our daughter doesn’t care? If she never has a child to leave it to? What then?”

Anne shrugged. “*C’est dommage*,’ as she herself would say. Now please, Hare. Help me with my pearls.”

“You know I can’t do that,” he said.

Anne opened her eyes, to will Harry into helping her, but her bedroom was empty.

In 1969 her fifth graders understood Leonov’s steps in the lunar dust as the fulfillment of prophecy, portending a hailstorm of atomic bombs, radioactive shockwaves, the definitive conclusion of America. The last school day before Christmas Break, and yet they marched into class wearing gray faces. The paranoia everywhere was a thousandfold of what followed Sputnik. But the Soviets never attacked, never converted earth’s ancient satellite into an orbiting weapons installation. Instead, in what struck Anne as typically Russian, they built the largest optical telescope on Earth, and placed it on a mountain in the Urals, so KGB colonels and secretaries general and amputee war veterans and school children on holiday and common laborers who’d exceeded such and such manufacturing quota could all ride a funicular to the summit and look into the telescope’s eyepiece and proudly confirm that yes, the crimson flag planted by Leonov still stands, rippled and unmoving in the airless lunar

atmosphere. What does it matter that the Soviet Union has since collapsed, that the visitors to the telescope are now presidents and Duma deputies, that the blinking eyelashes batting against the polished lens of the eyepiece now belonged to the mistresses of ministers and oligarchs—that they leave a trace of mascara that someone has to be paid a decent wage to wipe away? The telescope still sees, the funicular still glides up and down its greased rails, one car ascending and the other descending, a counterbalance of enclosed bodies, those who have seen and those about to see. The Earth keeps spinning, and even though the orbit is degrading, the golden Hammer and Sickle are still plain, evidence of something.

One night, after an eight-year-old Mina had taken ownership of her father's binoculars, Anne had reclined in a chaise longue in the backyard of their old house, watching her daughter gaze at the moon through seven-power magnification.

"Mommy," Mina cried with a spasm of excitement, "I can see it! I can see the flag!"

"Of course you can, dear," Anne had said, tapping the lit tip of a Virginia Slim into a glass ashtray.

"No. I really *can*. It's just a little speck of red."

Mina held the binoculars out to her mother, who rose, took them in her hand, and spread them to adjust to her wider-set eyes. She trained her view unto the moon. Of course she saw nothing. No flag, no face, no feature more prominent than the very largest of craters. "Well, I stand corrected," she said. "There it is. A little square of red."

"I *told* you," Mina had scolded, her small body shivering in the night.

When Ben Nye took Anne's coat at the New Year's party, Lawrence Welk was playing on the stereo. *Adiós, au revior, aufweidersehn 'til then*. For a moment Anne thought the Nyes were laughably out of step, until she saw the crowd and realized the music was meant to be appreciated ironically. *Here's a wish, and a prayer, that every dream comes true*.

Perhaps thirty guests, mostly younger than the Nyes, crowded with drinks in their hands, jockeying to fill the scarce pockets of silence in the crowded living room. Anne deduced most of them were graduate students after Sharon, who wore a second skin of makeup and had apparently bathed in Estée Lauder, reminded her that Ben taught linguistics at the university in Stamford.

"Your hip seems better," Sharon said.

Ben appeared holding a wicker basket full of paper hats and noisemakers.

"The miracle of modern pharmacology," Anne said, waving away the basket.

Sharon turned to hear a joke a guest was telling as Ben leaned drunkenly into Anne, wrapping his free arm around her. She struggled to support his weight. He said, "Better stock up. The End Times are coming. That's kind of the theme for the evening."

"So I've heard," Anne said. "But I feel prepared."

He leaned into her even more heavily, and Anne had to spread her feet just to prop him up. He said, "You want to see something, Mrs. Rosen?"

Anne followed a swerving Ben Nye into the kitchen, which was hot and close with

young men and women smoking and laughing above a convincing pitch. He led her through a painted door, down a dark stairwell, and into their cold basement. Anne took the steps one at a time. Once below the house he pulled the string hanging from a bare bulb and Anne found herself standing among ziggurats of cardboard boxes labeled with permanent marker. Down here, the music from upstairs was just a vibration. "This," Ben said, nodding at a large rack of steel shelves. On each Anne saw rows of white, unlabeled five gallon plastic buckets.

"You wanted to show me paint?"

Ben chuckled affectedly. He grunted as he heaved one of the buckets off of its shelf. He set it heavily on the concrete floor and peeled off the lid. "It's rice. They're all food. Each one is different. Rice, buckwheat, oats, et cetera. Just gotta keep it dry down here and each one will last for years. And look behind you."

Anne turned. Through the darkness she made out another industrial-strength rack of shelves, bearing three-dozen or so five-gallon water cooler bottles, resting on their sides, like heavy ordinance.

"We've got a generator, too," Ben said. "And ten gallons of gas."

"Oh. This is certainly something."

Ben laughed. She could smell the alcohol on his breath. "Mind you, I don't really believe anything terrible can happen from a computer glitch," he said, "but I got to thinking. It makes sense to be prepared, in case the worst happens. Whatever 'the worst' could possible be."

Anne nodded, wondering what he expected her to say.

"Mrs. Rosen, you and I both know nothing will happen. But just in case it does, you're welcome to stay with us. Until things get back to normal."

Anne said, "Ben, I need to tell you something. It's about your dog."

Ben's smile shifted latitudes. "I'm sorry?"

"Your dog. The pit bull. He's missing, isn't he?"

"A pit bull?" He laughed, suddenly. "Jesus. Sharon would never—"

Something crashed upstairs. Something made of glass had broken into a million irretrievable pieces. They could hear it tinkling across the floor above them.

"Then our other neighbors," Anne said. "The Campbells? They must have a—"

"N-no," Ben said slowly, turning toward the stairs. "They don't have a—I'm sorry, Mrs. Rosen. That sounded like the crystal decanter. I better—" Ben clomped up the steps, leaving her alone beneath the burning bulb. The shadows behind the white buckets of grain moved as the hanging light swayed, making the buckets seem to lean. There was still the open rice bucket on the ground. Ben had forgotten to reseal it.

Upstairs she found that the Nyes had hired a bartender, a prematurely balding young man who stood behind a leaning rattan bar, wearing a bow tie and an unpressed tuxedo shirt. When Anne ordered a martini he unscrewed a bottle of Stolichnaya and she said, "Don't you have gin?"

Was his smile a smirk? “No, ma’am. I’m sorry. I only have whiskey, rum, and vodka. Most people are drinking cosmos. Or white Russians.”

“People still drink white Russians?”

“Oh, God yes,” he said. “Thanks to *The Big Lebowski*.”

“The big what?”

“It’s a movie. About a bowler who gets his rug stolen.” He said this as if she had recently awoken from a coma.

Anne said, “I think I’ll stick with a vodka martini.”

“Great,” he said through a paper smile. “Do you want that dirty?”

She carried her drink to the two reupholstered davenports in the living room, and sat on the periphery of a conversation between two lightly-bearded men and a girl wearing plum lipstick, whose skirt hem climbed higher up her thigh each time she re-crossed her legs. She had a camera in her lap.

The young men were flushed and talking loudly, swilling pink cocktails. Every once in a while the girl would raise her camera and take a picture, the flash temporarily blinding Anne, making her shut her eyes for a second or two, then wait for the color to return to return to her vision, for the scene before her to repopulate with these young, laughing, rosy-cheek faces.

An overweight man sat across from her. He was stuffed into a tweed blazer and he wore wireframe glasses that were too small for his head, which was pinched by a blue bow tie. He was saying, to the young man seated beside Anne, “That may be so, but what you only ever hear about are these over-caffeinated geeks working eighteen-hour shifts to reprogram the world’s computers, just to recognize the year 2000, you know, like they’re building our ark for us, so we won’t have to race for higher ground when our bank accounts all zero-out and airplanes start falling from the sky. It’s like they’re our messiahs, only in reality they’re cogs. They’re the system self-correcting. And the way they talk about the design in the coding scheme’s flaw, it’s almost biblical, like it’s really the same struggle as always, this structural notion that all of civilization has been damage control since original sin.”

Anne’s pulse quickened; she began to time her interjection. She wanted to say what would have been wasted on Mina: How the years were only given their Gregorian numbers in retrospect, which means there never was a Year Zero, a cleft copied from the Jews. And yet a human life has a zero year, a starting point of nothing, waiting numberless for one full rotation. All that bubble and fuss before a single candle can be plunged into a frosted cake. If there is no zero year, then there is no foundation. Without nothing, there is no something. There’s no flaw in the design; the design is the flaw. But before she could interrupt, the girl took another picture, blinding Anne, dashing her thoughts into a scattered confusion.

Someone changed the record. Sinatra. *That’s life. That’s what all the people say—*

“Are those pictures going to turn out?” Anne asked while her blanched vision was still restitching the girl’s face.

The girl smiled and turned the back of the camera to Anne. There was a little glowing screen. “I know right away,” she explained, yelling over the music. “It’s a digital camera.”

Anne saw herself in the bright image inside the tiny screen, a pale, overdressed old woman, detritus slightly unfocused in the foreground of the girl’s intended subject, her pearls hanging astray. Two men were standing behind her spot on the sofa, frozen while laughing at something Anne hadn’t heard, one of them reaching out to grasp the arm of the other.

“It’s like a Polaroid,” the girl said. “Except you instantly know what you have.”

Anne nodded as the girl took back her camera. She leaned into her sofa, perusing the other images she’d taken. She said, “I probably take too many, you know. I just delete most of them. But it’s a godsend for the shitty photographer.”

The young man sitting next to Anne, the person with whom the overweight man had been arguing, produced a joint and, probably as joke, turned to ask Anne if she wanted to smoke. The music from the record player, Rosemary Clooney, became more clear as half the room paused to hear her reply. “Oh, no thank you,” Anne said with a wave of her hand. “I don’t care for it.” Then, to ameliorate her strangeness: “I just like the way it smells.”

“That’s like me and cocaine,” the young man said, and Anne was startled when the room erupted with laughter.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “My name is Evan.” They shook hands. “You have a lovely accent. Are you German?”

“Thank you, Evan. Originally, yes. But I emigrated from Holland.”

“Oh, how wonderful! And what do you do?” He was drunk and enjoying his boldness, this business of flirting with the old lady at the party.

“I’m retired,” she said. “But I used to teach.”

“At UConn?”

The girl in the short skirt took another picture, erasing Anne’s vision. Behind her closed lids she watched a golden supernova unfurl and scatter. “No,” she said. “At an elementary school.”

“Are you all right?” she heard Evan ask.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Anne said, opening her eyes, though her vision had yet to return.

More couples arrived through the foyer, after being greeted by Ben. The house was filling up. Anne’s outfit was becoming too warm. The record that had been playing, the Rosemary Clooney—no, clearly it was Billie Holliday—singing *Don’t worry bout me—* ended, and a moment later someone put on The Beach Boys’ a cappella “Auld Lang Syne,” until Sharon shrieked from somewhere in the aft of the house and came barreling toward the record player, crying, “No! No, it’s too soon! Who played this, goddammit? It’s not *nearly* midnight!” Sharon lifted the plastic lid of the phonograph and the needle shrieked across the vinyl, unzipping the party. Laughter and playful claims of innocence came from the young couples crowded around her. She switched the record and Anne heard the warm rasp of the needle finding the groove. *That old black magic.*

“Can you *believe* these people?” Sharon cried as she poured herself into the sofa on the other side of Evan, her cocktail sloshing over the rim of its glass, spilling a spot of pinked vodka on her dress, between her breasts. “Fucking postmodernists,” she said, sulking. “No mind for ritual.” Then: “Oh, Evan. I see you’ve met our neighbor.”

“I have,” Evan said.

“Did Mrs. Rosen tell you that she’s a writer as well?” Sharon asked.

“You are?” Evan said. He seemed genuinely intrigued.

“I suppose,” Anne demurred, looking into her drink.

“She writes under her maiden name,” Sharon said. “Frank, isn’t it? Her daughter gave us a copy of her last publication. She was in *Macro-Fiche!* Can you believe it? The magazine run by that woman brought up on obscenity charges.”

“Excuse me?” Anne asked Sharon. “What do you mean?”

“I know you!” the girl with the camera exclaimed suddenly. “Well, I read your story. The one about the dinosaurs? My roommate showed me her copy. Oh, that was so cool!”

“Thank you,” Anne said.

“Can I take your picture?”

Anne nodded. Evan and Sharon crowded into the frame as the girl snapped Anne’s picture. For a moment Anne felt herself pulled, along with the rest of the visible universe, into the aperture beneath the gleaming lens.

“Let’s take another,” the girl said, frowning at her camera. “Your eyes were closed.”

Anne, now the center of attention for the half dozen or so guests accumulated on and around the Nyes’ two sofas, was prompted to give a thumbnail sketch of “The Shrinking Monsters,” which she did while holding the stem of her glass, staring into the imploding galaxy of golden and purple scattered, swirling motes of light, waiting for her vision to tune back in. When she could see again, the Nyes’ young guests seemed impressed, or perhaps incredulous.

“That’s fantastic,” Evan said to Anne, his unshaven face so close to hers they could have kissed.

The pudgy young man in the tweed coat pushed his glasses a centimeter up the bridge of his nose and said, “Well, the universe *is* expanding, but, you know, what you describe, that’s not exactly happening.”

A pall fell over their little circle. Anne set her face.

The young man continued. “The universe is expanding, but not all of it. You, me, the planet Earth, we’re all the same size we’ve ever been. All the *stuff*, it stays the same size. What’s expanding is what’s *in between*. The nothing. That’s what keeps getting bigger and bigger.”

Anne felt her cheeks grow hot.

“Mark,” Evan said. “Don’t be a dick.”

“What?” the overfed boy cried. “Don’t recriminate me just for—”

The conversation never recovered. Sharon excused herself to attend to the next

wave of hors d’oeuvres. Evan and the girl in plum lipstick left to smoke their drugs in the backyard, their eyes plain with the desire to reduce their company to each other. Anne had intended to ask Evan to help free her from the sofa. She was unsteady, from mixing the pills with vodka, and left seasick from the girl’s flashing camera.

Sharon reappeared and sat down beside Anne, causing her to sink even lower into the cushions. Sharon was fully drunk, Anne realized, her every movement loose and swaying. Sharon said, “I just wanted to tell you, how much I *admire* how well you’ve carried on. Ever since, I mean.”

“I’m sorry?”

“How well you’ve kept everything together, since Henry passed.”

“Harry,” Anne said. “But thank you.” She sipped her martini. It had gotten warm.

“You know, we had a scare last year,” Sharon said. “I found this thing on Ben’s back, and it turned out to be cancer. We were able to have it removed. He didn’t even need chemo, and now his oncologist says he’s out of the woods. But I couldn’t help thinking, ‘I’d *never* be as strong as Anne Rosen.’ I just couldn’t do it. Go on, I mean, after that kind of loss.”

“Well,” Anne said. “At least you’d have all that food.”

Sharon recoiled, hardening. “I’m sorry?”

“Oh, never mind,” Anne said. “Would you help an old lady escape this sofa?”

Sharon stood and pulled Anne from the couch. Anne straightened her olive skirt. She looked sadly at Sharon and thought, *Reprieve is just another hiding place*. But aloud she said, “I’m happy Ben is fine.”

Anne wore a fixed smile as she walked through the growing crowd to the bathroom. She locked herself inside and leaned against the edge of marble countertop. She made sure she took at least five minutes to finish her warm martini, which the bartender had made too strong. People knocked, tried the door. Anne said nothing, only drank looking at the toilet, the flickering candle on its tank, the framed map of the Paris metro. After she finished her drink, Anne set the glass on the countertop, and left the bathroom to find Sharon, to thank her for the lovely time—but really, she should be going. Anne told Sharon truthfully that she was succumbing to the onset of a headache. Sharon made a sufficient amount of protest, but by the time Anne finished insisting, there was Ben, holding her coat.

Anne walks through the freezing air of her backyard, triggering her motion-sensing lights, which flush her snow-covered lawn with a golden radiance. She can hear laughter from the Nyes’ party, and the new issue of old music: Fred Astaire. “They Can’t Take That Away from Me.”

She looks up and tries to organize the stars into their constellations, beginning with Orion, the Hunter, the Dr. Bodner of the night sky, between Gemini and Canis Major. The stars become unfixed; she loses track, either from the Dilaudid or the swelling headache. *The song has ended but as the songwriter wrote—*

Anne rubs her temples. God, her head hurts.

The way you hold your knife—

She's rocked by a sudden volt of barking from the other side of the fence. Anne's heart races. It takes her a moment to realize the sound comes from a living thing. The dog, the dog. Of course it isn't dead. Of course it's still looking for her. She waits to recover, to adjust, but her heart won't stop pounding. She can see the pit bull through a slit between pickets. It barks, gnashing at her, but she decides to trust the fence and draws closer, until she can see its curved teeth, the pores on the canine's twitching, liver-colored nose. The dog barks. It says, *Come closer.*

But ho-ho-ho, who's got the last laugh—

The music is cut off, mid-note. The revelers at the Nye house begin to cry off a countdown to midnight.

"Ten!"

The pit bull whimpers. It wants her attention. Anne bends over, sees that one of the dog's eyes is brown, the other as blue as a marble. Her headache throbs, stabbing behind her own left eye. She tries to tell the dog that she understands, that she knows how it feels to be nothing, to be two things in one, but her words come out as slurry.

"Nein!"

Anne reaches out through the cold. Steam purls from the dog's nose as it whines, just beyond her fingertips. She tries to step forward, but stumbles. She falls to one knee. The dog licks the gap between the pickets, trying to taste her. And then: the sound returns. At first faint, at first far.

No, she thinks. Now is the wrong time.

"Eight!"

No, you've already come today.

But the sound grows louder; it comes nearer, passing through Anne's body like a wave. Never has it sounded more like a train. Instead of feeling herself lifted, Anne becomes heavier, denser, pulled toward the frozen earth. A weakened blood vessel in the left half of her brain explodes. She tries to stand but her knees buckle. She falls.

"Seven!"

Anne tries to call for help, but she cannot recall how to form the word "help" or the word "me." The sound rises, filling her like a glass.

Anne sees herself from above, her small body rumpled in the snow like a pile of forgotten clothing, and yet in this moment she feels enormous and expansive, beautiful and grounded to all of the electricity in the entire universe.

"Six!"

She sees herself lying in the snow, but also sees herself rise and walk into the house, the main character of an unlikely future. She sees her one self try to cry for help, moving only one leg weakly, while the other Anne descends into her basement, past her stacked boxes of remainders, to the wooden chest that holds her old diary. She sees this Anne run her fingers over the fabric cover, a plaid of red and white and tan. She's thumbing the pages.

The book falls open to the most-visited page: July twentieth, 1944.

Kitty, Great news!

"Five!"

Anne tries to comprehend the words in front of her as an army of computer programmers rest and sigh and sip champagne, having won the long struggle to relegate all the tangled July twentieths to their proper centuries, establishing the correct sequence of the Siege of Chartres, the death of her sister Margot in a nursing home, the birth of Alexander the Great. The daring and wonderful assassination of Adolf Hitler in his Prussian bunker. Anne regrets that she'll never see the statue Claus von Stauffenberg in the center of Old Berlin.

"Four!"

The Anne inside turns a page.

Wednesday, August 2, 1944:

Dearest Kitty,

I always thought I would run from the Annex, clomping down the stairs when it was finally safe to reappear, but now that the day has finally come, after Father tore away the blackout cover to show me the daylight carnival of Canadian soldiers kissing delirious Dutch girls in the street, their olive shoulders and dented helmets garlanded with flowers, my pale legs quaked so badly Peter had to hold me, his arm tight around my waist. We took the stairs that way, one at a time. Even at that moment, Kitty, I tried to walk without sound, terrified by the hammering of my heart. I thought I might die before we reached the street. I never felt Peter's arm fall from my body, I only realized at some point that I was alone in the street, squinting under a sky so blue it was blinding. Never has the stench of the canal smelled so sweet.

"Three!"

I knelt, right there on the street, and pressed my cheek onto the cool stones. When I stood, the first face I saw was another girl, dark-eyed and pale and haggard, squinting half-blind like me, seeming slightly deranged, wearing an ill-fitting and moth-eaten coat. I thought, "Here is a girl like me, who has been hiding behind the walls of a building across the street!" And then I realized, as the world came into focus, that she was my reflection in the glaze of a window. It wasn't until I began to laugh that I realized I had been crying. And then Father and Mother were beside me, also laughing, also crying. The street was consumed by rumbling tanks and sputtering jeeps, and thousands of boots, marching out of cadence.

“Two!”

One Anne moans in the snow as the other rises from the basement, the diary in her hand. She will sit at her desk and realize she has forgotten to turn off her typewriter. She'll see that it has been waiting for her, for hours, still humming, now warm to the touch.

“One!”

One Anne spends the rest of the night reading, while the other struggles to roll onto her back in the freezing backyard, the snow melting into her loosened hair, staring up at a black sky scattered with too many stars. One of them thinks, What a gift it is, to be able to begin.