

Misophonia and Other Sounds

Lallah could hear him chewing from the other side of the house. His back teeth hitting against each other with a hollow, knocking sound. The smack of saliva against the back of his throat. His gulped-air swallowing. The noise of it, honed into sharp edges, sped through the air until it found her, and she covered her ears with her hands, but still she heard him. He even chewed in his sleep. She wondered if he knew how the soft slapping of his tongue against the roof of his mouth woke her in the quietest part of the night. Sometimes she would creep off into the guest room, even though she thought she could still hear him through the walls, eating his imaginary meal in the dark.

She hadn't always been able to hear him like this. Her doctor had called it misophonia, a sensory processing condition that caused extreme sensitivity to certain 'trigger' sounds. When she'd started getting headaches from other, normal, everyday sounds, he'd changed his diagnosis to hyperacusis; although, he'd made it clear there were no diagnostic tests that would prove it. He'd recommended therapy, his voice shrugging off the insinuation that she might as well have hysteria, her treatment nothing more than quiet Victorian isolation in the country.

For his part, Silas tried to chew more quietly, and Lallah loved him for it. She rested her head against his chest, like she did when they were dating, when the sound of his heartbeat used to soothe her, though now it banged against his ribs so loud, she was sometimes afraid he was having a heart attack. She could even hear his blood moving through his veins, the opening and closing of valves that pushed it steadily back to his heart. Sometimes, the soft whooshing would lull her to sleep, the banging drum in his chest cast off as background noise. But most nights, sleep was a dream she could barely recall.

Lallah spent her weekends sound proofing their home: thicker doors, area rugs over the carpets, heavy curtains, wall hangings. Anything to help muffle the sounds that increasingly pushed into the house. The high whine of lawn mowers and leaf blowers, the squeal of breaks each time the mail truck stopped, or Amazon delivered a package. The shrill screaming laughter of the neighborhood kids that pierced her skull like needles. Silas rolled his eyes but didn't try to talk her out of her fortifications. He didn't help, either, but that was fine. Lallah was happier without the noise of him next to her. She bought industrial earmuffs and noise-canceling headphones. She started wearing earplugs at night, but they made her ears sweat, and she often found them under her pillow in the morning.

The day she got fired was the day Silas finally confronted her.

"You can't keep on like this, Lolly." His voice level and calm, crashing like thunder. She covered her ears, looking around for her headphones. Silas gently pulled her hands away and hunched his tall, imposing frame to look her in the eye. She could hear his breath like the howling of a storm, and her hands pushed against his, wanting to block out the sound.

"Lallah," he said. "Please."

"It's too loud," she whispered, her own voice ringing in her ears. "It hurts."

He sighed, and she heard the crackle of a cough before it exploded from his lungs, a concussive blast that sent her to her knees. She covered her ears but felt something warm and sticky on her fingers. She smelled the iron tang of blood in the air even as she marked the thin red line of it down her palm. Before she knew it, Silas was there, holding her head against his chest, his hands covering her ears. He kissed her head and whispered apologies and declarations of love, but all Lallah heard was fear crawling through each strident word.

Silas tried to protect her after that. He made her a comfortable nest in the basement. He pulled the mattress off the guestroom bed and piled it high with pillows and blankets. He brought her a white noise machine someone from his work had offered, saying that white noise had helped them with their tinnitus. He set up a small flat screen that connected to her computer and the Roku.

“You can just use subtitles if you want to watch something,” he said, the softness of his words like grit in an open wound.

Lallah nested there in the quietest part of the house, protected by blankets and headphones. She didn't tell Silas, but ever since her eardrums had ruptured, the ringing in her ears had started. The white noise machine his colleague had used was no help. The shushing of static and washing of waves upon some unknown shore only caused more pain, not less. The high whine had started small, like the buzzing of an unseen insect, constant but bearable. But as the days passed, the sound grew, filling every part of her. She would swear there were times she could feel it in her teeth or vibrating through her body like electricity.

Help, she texted Silas.

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Ringing in my ears like spikes or knives

What can I do?

...

Lolly?

Don't know please help please

But she knew Silas had called all the doctors and specialists he could find. They had gone to hospital after hospital, but she was a mystery. The doctors would have been happy to poke and prod and play with the puzzle of her, but Lallah had been overwhelmed by the buzzing of lights and the humming, thumping, screaming of machines and people. The crying that seeped in from everywhere. Eventually, she had curled into herself, pressing against her headphones, and refused to move. Silas had wheeled her out of the building and back to the car. She could still hear the memory of his apologies to all the doctors who'd been able to do nothing for her.

“Lallah?” Silas’ smallest voice whispered from upstairs. He was in the living room on the far side of the house. Lallah could hear him shifting his weight in her favorite oversized reading chair. She was about to text him when he started crying, though he muffled it behind his hands. The weight of his pain pressed down on her through the layers of their home, their first together, a starter home they’d said laughing. Because they’d wanted to start their life here, start a family one day. Right now, the only thing they had to take care of was each other, and in the spaces between Silas’s sobs and tremulant breaths, Lalla knew she was failing him.

She heard the buzz of his phone shudder through the air and Silas’ deep breath in and out, pushing away the pain, before he whispered, “Hello?” and Lallah was almost surprised that she couldn’t hear the voice on the other end of the line. She buried her head under a pillow, not wanting to eavesdrop, but even at his quietest, Silas still sounded like he was in the same room.

“Oh, hey,” he said. “No. It’s worse, I think. No, I already called all the doctors I could think of. They called doctors who called doctors. I even had someone from NASA call, but all they want to do is run tests like Lallah is some kind of lab rat, and she just ends up in pain.”

He walked across the house, footsteps drumming overhead.

“No more doctors, Izzy. No more tests. She just needs quiet. She’ll get better...” His voice trailed off as he went outside, though Lallah could still hear the humming of him, soft and gentle from this distance.

Silas’ sister, Isabel. Lallah wrinkled her nose, freckles shifting across her face. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Isabel. Isabel was fine. Polite. Considerate. As though she’d been raised to be courteous and respectful and now considered it part of her job to be so. The only genuine warmth Lallah had ever felt from Isabel was from the overflow of love she poured out to Silas. Lallah had wondered how long it would take before Isabel wanted to put her in an institution. She’d heard the arguments Isabel often had with Silas about psychosomatic disorders, mental illness, nothing Silas could do to help. Silas had protected her though, even from his sister. He’d been the rock she always leaned on, but she knew, with enough time and pressure, his strength would wear away like any stone.

When he came back into the house, he said, “Sorry about that. She means well, but she’s wrong.” He sighed, pulling his fingers through his hair, tangling the gold-kissed curls she loved so much. “I love you, Lolly,” he breathed through the air. She messaged him:

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Silas laughed, quiet and sad. She could hear him trying not to cry again, so she texted,
Come visit ☺

With soft steps and creaking risers, Silas came tenderly into the basement, his head so near the drop ceiling, Lallah felt almost Lilliputian looking up at him, small and huddled among her blankets. He sat down on the mattress, waiting, his face a mask of hope hiding the worry and fear contained beneath. She reached out her hand and brushed the stubble against his cheek, her thumb trailing over his soft, full lips. He leaned in and kissed her, and the noise of it took on shape and color, filling her head with slices of red light. Silas must have felt her body tense because he pulled back, searching her face. She drew him back to her, wanting his touch, needing him enough to ignore the pain of sound, but he resisted.

“No,” he mouthed in a torrent of breath.

Lallah reached for him again, but he held her back, and she looked hard into his eyes. Soft green flecked with brown, like a meadow or glade, someplace she knew she would always want to be. He pulled her against him, holding her tight for uncounted seconds, before letting her go and ghosting away upstairs.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said once he’d closed the basement door, the words shattering her ears, though this time the pain was in her heart. And as the noise of him slipped away, front door locking, car door shutting, engine roaring away down the road, Lallah cried in silence.

As the days passed, the edges of Lallah’s world began to fray, the ridges and folds of her mind shredding with lack of sleep and the overstimulation of sound, the constant ringing in her ears. Silas brought the sedatives her earlier doctors had prescribed, and though she hadn’t wanted to take them then, now they were the only thing that dulled her senses enough to allow her to sleep.

She rarely ventured out of the basement these days, Silas bringing down whatever she needed, though she tried not to ask for anything. Still, he came. He wanted to learn sign language with her, and he was teaching her a few new words every day. Even fumbling as she was with her mind-numbed fingers, Lallah found she enjoyed learning this new way to speak. The intimacy of watching her lover's hands whisper his heart to hers made her long to kiss him, to hold him close and make love, but Silas still pulled away, afraid.

She drifted through nights and days, shrouded in the fragile light of basement windows. The house screamed around her: water gurgling through pipes, floors groaning under padded feet, windows rattling in aging casements. Outside the cicadas screamed of murder, squirrels skittered and squawked, and Lallah prayed for an early, dagger-sharp winter to put all living, noise-crawling things to bed, covered with a heavy blanket of snow, but it would be weeks yet.

Do we wait? her mind wanted to know. It was the only voice she could bear now, the whispering prattle of her other self. Many conversations had been had in the soft-sedated cloud of her mind.

Wait for what?

It does not have to be winter to be quiet.

It will never be quiet. The world has never been silent.

But it could be.

Lallah did not answer. These were thoughts that came and went and came again. She nestled deeper into her blankets and waited for Silas to come home.

“I go away. Work,” he signed, his thick, blunted fingers stumbling over the words.

Lallah shrugged and mimed pointing to a watch. How long, she wanted to know.

Three fingers. Three days.

“Isabel will come. Check in.”

She shook her head. She didn't want Isabel clattering through her home, staring pity down her sloping nose with her well-meaning condescension. “No,” she signed, striking her first two fingers against the tip of her thumb, like a mouth snapping shut.

Silas nodded his fist back at her. “Yes.” Then signing, “Already arranged.”

Lallah breathed out hard through her nose, jaw clenching, but she said nothing. Let Isabel come in on her high horse, as long as she was quiet, as long as she didn't linger. She nodded agreement and flicked her thumbs at Silas.

“Yes, she'll be quick,” he agreed.

The day he left, he came down and sat with her, tucking her into her blankets and holding her hand. The small basement windows were dark, the world beyond them still quiet. One of Lallah's favorite times. She could hear the life of him beating and breathing and swirling through his body, and for once, she took off her headphones to hear it better. Crawling out of her nest of blankets and pillows, she curled up against him, laying her head on his chest. His heart clanged against her ears, his breath like a storm, and Lallah pulled closer to the warm rhythm of him, ignoring the pain that was building at the stem of her neck, that would push up into her head with blinding strokes later. Silas wrapped his heavy arms around her, staying that way until he tapped her three times on her shoulder, the signal that he needed to go.

He tucked her back in and kissed her hand. Waved. Walked up the stairs and away. Lallah closed her eyes, following the sound of him until he was gone, and then she drifted into sleep before the pain in her head and her heart could become sharp enough to bring tears.

She drifted in and out of awareness for two days, numbing herself to sleep with sedatives, her waking hours fogged and hazy. Wandering through her home in the dead of night, standing in the walk-in closet to breathe in the scent of Silas that clung to his shirts. She ate and bathed, read books when her mind was clear enough. Once, she opened the sliding glass door and stood on the back porch, her breath misting in the early winter air. The distant hum of electrical wires was all she heard, so she stood there in the cold until her bare feet were numb. It was the first time she'd been outside in months, and she breathed in the crisp, smoky air. She felt almost peaceful.

Then Isabel came. That last day before Silas' return. She rang the doorbell, shattering Lallah's sleep. Keys jangling like symphony cymbals, the crashing of the deadbolt, and slamming of the front door, and Isabel was inside. Her heels stabbed into the floor as she called out for Lallah, voice high and warbling. Pain seared through Lallah's skull, the aura of it almost blinding, and she curled into herself, hugging a pillow hard against her head.

Isabel's violent steps brought her to the basement, stopping at the edge of Lallah's mattress. "What are you doing asleep at this hour?" she said, her voice screaming through the room. She pulled off the blanket, holding it to her wrinkled nose before tossing it aside.

"Don't think you can fool me. You may have Silas wrapped around your little finger, convincing him to baby you with your little charade, but it isn't going to work with me."

Lallah stilled. Maybe if she just ignored her, Isabel would go away. She felt the mattress shift as Isabel leaned against it and tried to nudge Lallah into moving. Another nudge. Another.

"Fine," Isabel said, "but this house is disgusting, and Silas doesn't deserve that. If you won't clean it before he gets home, I guess I will. Some of us aren't so selfish."

She went back upstairs, crashing through rooms and closets, pulling out cleaners and rags. Lallah's body curdled at the hissing of spray bottles, her spine shivered at the squawk of

mirrors and glass being wiped clean. Tears ran down her face at the banging of cupboard doors, opened and closed, opened and closed. All the sounds began to merge, an overwhelming cacophony. Pain sliced through her, a thousand cuts, but she refused to move. Let Isabel finish her righteous purification of the house, as long as she left. It couldn't be much longer; the house wasn't big enough or even dirty enough for much more, Lallah thought, pushing her headphones harder against her ears.

Until, finally, there was silence. Lallah lifted her head, waiting to hear the sound of heels clicking away through the front door, the turn of the lock, Isabel's car rumbling down the road. Instead, there was a roar, a ragged screaming sound as if the world itself had been torn apart. Lallah felt it in every part of her body, ripping and tearing. She felt wetness behind her headphones, smelled iron, and knew her ears were bleeding. The world went red, and because her mind couldn't think through the pain, her body acted, and she was running up the basement stairs to the main floor of the house to see Isabel pushing the vacuum cleaner down the hallway.

Lallah lunged, grabbing the messy bun at the back of Isabel's head, and yanked her free from the vacuum. Her fingernails dug furrows through Isabel's scalp, and her hand pulled away a thick knot of bleached and tangled hair. Isabel screamed, the vacuum cracking against the floor as she let go and flung her arms over her head. Lallah reached and clawed in blind animal instinct, tearing at Isabel until she fell to the floor. Scuttling past her, Lallah yanked on the vacuum cord, ripping it free of the wall, and turned to Isabel, who lay sprawled on the beige nylon carpet, her face wide with shock, mouth parted to scream or balk, but Lallah gave her no time. She rushed at Isabel, hands out to grab her as she scrabbled backward along the floor, but then Isabel was up and running toward the front door. She paused long enough to grab her purse

before she was out of the house and hurrying to her car, not bothering to look back to see if Lallah still chased her.

She's gone. She's gone. She's gone, her mind cheered.

Lallah cradled her head in her arms. It hurt. God, it hurt. She'd lost her headphones somewhere, and her hands were slick with blood, Isabel's and her own. Her pulse thrummed in her ears, her hollow breath echoing in her head. Her own body was a riot of noise.

It can be quiet again, her mind whispered.

No. It will never be quiet. No matter how deep I bury myself, I would hear the worms digging through the earth or the plants growing in spring. It hurts. It will always hurt.

Tears, warm and silent, streaked down Lallah's face, salting her lips.

It can be quiet again. Quiet forever.

How?

We know how.

Silas made as little noise as he could when he came home. He'd heard Isabel's side of the story and nearly lost his voice yelling at her, only calming down when she began to cry. She'd thought Lallah was faking. No one could really be so sensitive to sound. Silas knew he'd forgive Izzy eventually, but he needed to make sure Lallah was okay. He'd paid the Uber driver double to get him home as fast as possible, and his heart stuttered as he stepped into the darkened house. He whispered Lallah's name and waited for her text reply, but none came.

The air in the house, sanitized and chemical-clean, felt heavy as he crept down to the basement, furtive and frightened. Lallah had always been a gentle person, unwilling to kill bugs or spiders in the house, trapping and releasing them instead. She hated bouquets of flowers

because she said they were already dead, and it was cruel to bring them into the house just to watch them rot. She never raised her voice in an argument or lashed out at others when she was angry. The hurt the world inflicted on her she released with kindness. Silas could no more imagine her attacking his sister than he could imagine breathing underwater. But he'd seen the overturned vacuum still lying in the hallway, the dark smears of blood on the floor, the smudge on the wall that trailed into the kitchen.

He'd been so excited to come home, to tell Lallah about the phone call he'd received from the specialist, an otolaryngologist who'd heard about her from a colleague. The whole flight home Silas had pictured how he'd tell her: *Hearing aids that don't amplify sound but deaden it. You can turn the sound down as far as you need to.* He'd practiced signing it until his fingers could flash the message like a promise. *You'll be able to hear again without pain, Lolly!* He had imagined her smile, the one that lifted his own, that warmed him and felt as gentle as a sigh. Until Isabel's call.

Now his smile was tucked away into the corners of his mouth, the pit in his stomach pulling him down into the bowels of his home, weighing more with each second Lallah didn't text. He moved toward the back of the room, and as he neared the pile of blankets and pillows, the acrid scent of blood filled the air, and he knew Lallah's eardrums had likely ruptured again. He sat down on the mattress and put his hand on the small lump beneath the blankets. It shifted, and then, as though she was waking slowly from a long hibernation, Lallah sat up. In the dim light, Silas could see the blood trailing from her ears, but there was so much of it. Too much.

"What happened?" he signed, reaching out to take her hands and feeling her fingers folded around something metal and sticky.

Lallah smiled and looked up, an old letter opener of her mother's uncurling from her fingers, the slender knife-like implement sheathed in blood. Her eyes wandered past him, settling, unfocused, somewhere over his shoulder. Silas whispered her name, his fingers brushing against her cheek, but she didn't respond. He shook her gently, then harder, calling her name until her head wobbled back and forth as though it were on a spring. The soft smile didn't change, her eyes still untethered.

"No no no no no. You didn't. Please tell me you didn't do this."

But she didn't answer, and as the thought that she never would drove into his heart like that dull-edged letter opener, Silas screamed in pain, burying his face in his hands. Beside him, Lallah's body flinched as though she could still hear him.

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