

Noise

by

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The unrelenting drip of a leaking roof into a bucket, contents trembling on the verge of overflowing.

You lean your forehead against the windowpane, watching raindrops slip from the leafless branches. It's cold in the flat, dark too, and you hug your ribs, shivering. There's no end to the *beepbeepbeep* of the answering machine. Even the hammer hasn't silenced it. But the baby's no longer crying.

You go to the kitchen and wash your hands again, carefully. Use the stained nailbrush, carefully. Dry them, carefully. In the hallway you stare at the mangled bits of the phone strewn on the floor. Where can the beeping be coming from? It penetrates your head your head. You pick up, one after another, splintered plastic, ruined chips, wires twisted like coloured embroidery threads—the sort you once used to plait into your hair; one after another, you hold them to your ear.

beepbeepbeep

There are fresh blotches of milk on your T-shirt. You lift its hem to form a cradle and with trembling fingers gather together all the pieces. You miss nothing, not even the strip of clear plastic that covered the display. You throw them into the washing machine and slam the door, only afterwards remembering that it's broken down again.

'Why is the washing machine full of red gunge?' Ben asked.

'It's Roasted Pepper.'

'For chrissake, why have you put roasted peppers in the washing machine?'

'Not peppers. Roasted Pepper. It's the name of a paint.'

So now there is red paint and telephone in the washing machine. Also, you think, the baby's screams. Though maybe that's only Ben's heavy metal CDs you added last night after he left to Go Out. You can't be sure, so you crouch by the machine, crack open the door, and listen.

Your breasts are sore, they're hot and hard and leaking. Time to feed the baby. 'A beauty,' Ben's mum says. 'And bright. Look how alert she is. The colic will pass.'

The baby's not in the washing machine. You have to find where you've put the baby.

You go into the bathroom, where you search the cabinet, the laundry hamper, even the toilet tank. Then you sit on edge of the dirty tub and examine the tags on the walls. Back in the day when you blockbusted whole trains with Graham, the black and gold letters with the snake karaks were hot. You bombed school walls with those turdy mustard drips till it became too freaking wack. But you really came into your own with the *Gemad* tag, that's the one you'd use if you were still writing. And just yesterday you added the perfect piece—a gentian blue platypus, the exact colour of the baby's eyes. Maybe after you put her down you could sneak out and at least hit the bus shelter, you'd be back before Ben came home.

'The baby's screaming her head off, and all the fuck you do is paint the bathroom walls!'

'I didn't hear her.'

'Yeah right. Didn't want to hear, more like.' And slammed out of the bathroom, kicking the spraycans out of his way.

'How could I hear her when the cheese is wailing so loud?'

But of course he couldn't hear you, the tags were shouting your name.

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'This is fantastic work, Caroline. Absolutely brilliant. Have you ever thought of doing a fine arts course?'

'I've thought about it, yeah.'

She grinned at him. Mr Lyle was a decent sort for a teacher, and he knew his stuff. And unlike most of the lazy sods in this sinkhole, he actually bothered to find new material from one year to the next. Nor did he think graffiti was criminal or destructive. ‘Of course it’s art,’ he’d told the class. ‘True art is always subversive. Graffiti artists are our hackers of physical rather than digital space.’

A fortnight later, he asked to speak with her after the lesson, then handed her a large brown envelope. ‘I’ve put together a couple of prospectuses for you. Take them home and study them,’ he told her. ‘You might even have a chance with the Slade. I’ll help you sort out a portfolio.’

‘There’s no money in art, Mr Lyle.’

‘Been speaking to your dad, have you?’

‘Yeah, well . . .’

‘Look, maybe I can have a chat with him.’

At that moment Ben put his head round the open door—gorgeous lanky Ben with green eyes like dragonfire, like wet grass on a dazzling spring morning, and the chipped front tooth which made his smile even sexier. He always told everyone it had been a snowboarding accident, but she knew from his mum, who cleaned at her dad’s office, that he’d slipped on an icy patch of pavement right outside their building. Caroline didn’t mind the lie, which was somehow endearing. Often Ben reminded her of a little boy who’d been caught with a pocketful of fags, or the bits of his mum’s favourite pink china cat, now wrapped in a hanky, that he’d smashed when careening through the front room. The way he still careened through the corridors at school . . .

‘Come on, Paintbrush, we’ll be late for maths.’

‘Just give us two minutes, Ben,’ Mr Lyle said. ‘Wait outside, please.’ And went to shut the door.

‘Caroline, I feel I ought to warn you.’

‘About what?’

Mr Lyle studied his paint-ringed fingernails for a moment. ‘Ben’s a bright lad, a very bright lad, but there are one or two things—’

‘Which things?’ she asked, her voice sharp.

‘That business with the fire, for one.’

‘Ben had nothing to do with it! He was at my house the whole evening. Which, by the way, I’ve already explained to the police.’ She remembered their lovemaking, he’d been exceptionally tender that night, afterwards had even played some of her favourite CDs downstairs in the sitting room while she was bathing and washing her hair. Even above the sound of running water she’d caught the occasional snatch of his voice, as usual slightly, sweetly out of tune. She had very acute hearing—uncanny hearing, her dad liked to call it.

Mr Lyle regarded her soberly, his cheeks flushed above his flamboyant beard, then smiled in that quizzical way of his.

‘You’re right, I shouldn’t be listening to rumours. I apologise.’

She nodded and turned to leave.

‘Caroline—’

‘Yeah?’

‘You’re forgetting the envelope.’

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You threw it into a wheelie bin on the way home, then went back ten minutes later and fished it out. Kept it till Ben opened it one day when he was going through your bottom drawer. ‘What do you want to keep all this old crap for, anyway?’ But he’s wrong—you keep so little. Long before, you’d buried the clots under the apple tree, you couldn’t have just flushed them down the toilet, could you? You had tried to save them, but your wardrobe began to stink. Even now, when you sneak out to visit Dad with the baby—not that you blame Ben for feeling uncomfortable—you can hear the plaintive whispering, though no words.

Sometimes you stretch out and put your ear to the ground, sometimes you can almost make out a ghostly *mamama*. There are so many voices under the earth, a cacophony of tags.

It's a good thing you've never told Ben, he gets crazy pissed off if even Julia or Rachel or any of your old mates comes round. Which they've stopped doing since the broken jug. But you don't really mind, you've no longer got much in common with them anyway. A baby changes everything. And you'd rather sleep when there's twenty minutes of quiet. *Ten* minutes. Babies are noise machines.

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A platypus closes eyes and ears underwater. From the packet you pull off a wad of cotton wool, divide it in two, screw the plugs into your ears. The *beepbeepbeep* continues, even louder, as though it's an alarm on a cardiorespiratory monitor like the one in the premie unit. Maybe your dad rang and left a message. He's always leaving messages. 'Ben's mum has just gone home. She's terribly pleased with the plasma TV Ben bought her. I think you'd better ring me, Caroline.'

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After searching and searching the flat, you draw the curtains in the living room, you're feeling shivery again, and the light hurts your eyes. You blink a few times, trying to clear the black dot from your vision, the flare and fizzle like sparklers. If you didn't have to find the baby, you'd lie down. But instead you sit at the computer Dad gave you for Christmas. 'So you don't lose touch altogether.' And Ben was quite happy about it, really. Now he uses it too, he gets lots of emails.

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You cross your arms over your swollen breasts. 'Milk cow,' Ben says sometimes with a laugh, he likes to suckle almost as much as the baby. Who's got to be somewhere. You google *baby* and come up with about 259,000,000 results. That's a lot of babies, one will do. But thirty or forty sites later, you still can't find her. Could Ben have hidden her under

*platypus*? ‘Likes his little jokes, our Ben does,’ his mum says. You’d better check, the baby might be in danger. Males have poisonous spurs on their hind limbs, whose sting is powerful enough to kill a small mammal.

*beepbeepbeep*

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Caroline would set the alarm for twelve, by which time her dad was fast asleep and she could sneak out and be back by five, or a bit after. Graham had a car, so they were able to cover a lot of territory. She always left her gear in his boot. Nobody could touch his wildstyle, and his *Inferno* pieces, incredibly detailed, incredibly guerrilla, burned themselves into her vision—her memory—like live embers. Whenever he completed a new painting, he’d read her the canto from which it was drawn. Commissions were starting to come in, he’d already done a couple of CD covers. He’d taught her everything she knew. Everything she wanted to know.

There was only a light drizzle, and when she met him at the bottom of her drive, they decided to hit the estate subway, which had recently been buffed. At least they’d stay dry.

Graham wasn’t big on kissing straight off, but this time he’d pulled her close as soon as she got into the car. And kept his arm around her as he drove.

‘Something wrong?’ she asked.

He shook his head, but she could hear a low rumble that reminded her of the sound a dog made deep inside its throat before it began to growl. She checked the sound system.

‘Want some music?’ Graham asked with his lazy smile.

‘Later maybe.’ She listened. ‘Isn’t the motor louder than usual?’

‘Not that I’ve noticed.’

But the nearer they came to the estate, the worse it got. By the time they’d parked the car, her teeth were on edge, and she had to exert all her self-control not to snarl at Graham. He was a lot like Grandpa, who had never snapped, never raised his voice. Whose silences had

sung her many times to sleep. She remembered riding with him in the farm lorry, not long after her mum's funeral; on the unpaved tracks the vehicle had shaken so much that her insides were soon heaving, her chalky bones screeching. Screeching, that place on the top of her head where her mum had always kissed her goodnight. Without a word Granpa had stopped for her to walk about, then wiped her cheeks with his rough hand. She'd nearly been sick.

She and Graham had just finished marking the outline when footsteps sounded behind them.

'What the fuck d'ya think you're doin?'

Three of them, big and meaty. The tattooed kid had thick lips, eyes like hot tarmac, shaved head. The growling, which had subsided as Graham and Caroline worked, now sprang at her with renewed ferocity. For a moment she thought there must be a dog, one of those vicious Rottweilers or Dobermanns. She swung her head round, heart beating fast. Only the blokes.

Graham showed them his spraycan. 'Just a graf, mates.'

'Piss off before we ram it in your cake-hole.' A phlegmy laugh, then Tattoo hawked and spat a glistening gob near Graham's foot. 'Your arse.'

Threads of light were beginning to flash before Caroline's eyes. 'Graham,' she said, pleading.

The three of them looked at her then, really looked. Exchanged glances. Grinned.

Graham stepped in front of her, his eyes on Tattoo. 'Listen, let's—'

The knife was out before he had a chance to finish. With a practised movement, Graham flicked off the spraycan lid, then shook the can and held it out before him.

'Run, Caro,' he said.

'But—'

'RUN, damn it!'

And she ran. For the rest of her life she would never forget that she ran, the frenzied baying of the pack echoing behind her through the empty November streets.

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In the afternoon the spotting began. By evening, Caroline could tell that this too, she would lose.

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Hidden in the loft where your dad will never find it is a portfolio of Graham's sketches, forty-three loose sheets you'd borrowed and never got a chance to return. There's even a page dense with studies of tormented figures for Canto XII. Once the baby settles, you'll scan them and upload the images to a decent site. By then you'll get out more and bomb the entire city with the platypus. Graf writers have already begun to use hypertext. Word will spread like a *healthy* virus, like a meme. For a moment you close your eyes: Graham's smile flashes at you, his lips move. He's trying to tell you something. If it weren't for the beeping, you'd be able to make it out. Angrily you shake your head, as though to dislodge a mobile implanted in your skull. They'll do that someday, won't they?

Out of the water a platypus has very sensitive hearing. You go to one site after another, calling her name. You whisper that you're sorry, it's not her fault. You promise to be more patient no matter how much she screams. Once you think you catch a glimpse of her slipping into sun-spangled shallows, but she's gone before you can be sure.

In the bucket the water is squalling. You fetch a basin from the kitchen, then empty the bucket into the toilet. There's a large damp patch on the living room ceiling in the shape of a potter wasp's nest, like a jug. Ben said he rang the landlord a week ago. The phone's no longer working, you guess.

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For weeks afterwards Caroline did nothing but paint—drink coffee, bitter black coffee, and paint. When she ran out of canvas board, she whited the images out and began again.



Layer of tag upon tag—there was a name for what she felt, if she could only find it. Elusive as dreams, sleep hid under her bed, in her wardrobe, behind drawn curtains, wherever abominations prefer to lurk. Finally her dad abandoned his good parent act, and she went back to school. Sometimes she showered and changed her clothes. In lessons it was easy to sit in the last row and draw.

‘Let me have a look at it.’

‘What?’

‘Your picture,’ Ben said. ‘I bet you’ve drawn old Sykes with tits down to her waist, lewd tattoos, and a navel piercing.’

Caroline’s lips twitched.

He slid into the seat next to her. ‘That’s the first smile from you in months. If we practise really hard, do you reckon you might be able to laugh?’

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In the portfolio is also the only photo you’ve got of Graham. Already fading, it reminds you of the disintegrating albums washed up at flea markets. And there’s no place in the flat where you could possibly keep it. At Christmas while Ben and Dad were busy drinking—arguing—you managed a quick scan before they reached flashpoint. Now you can access it online whenever you want, so long as you remember to clear browser cache and history. But you don’t look at it often.

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‘He doesn’t hit me.’

‘Then why is there a bruise around your eye?’ Julia asked.

‘It’s not a bruise.’

‘Come off it! I can see it right through your makeup.’

‘A wasp stung me. I’m allergic to wasps.’

‘Toxic insects come in all sizes and shapes.’

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At the swimming pool the wasps clustered thickly near the rubbish bins. Ben propped himself on an elbow and laughed at her struggle to protect her fast-melting ice cream. Finally, he flicked at the wasps with his thumb and middle finger, driving them away.

‘Persistent buggers,’ he said indulgently.

‘Mind. They’ll sting you.’

Two of them were back, buzzing loudly.

‘Not me,’ he said. ‘Nothing touches me.’

To demonstrate, he caught one of them between cupped palms. She could hear the angry buzzing, but Ben was right. It didn’t sting him, and after a few minutes he released it. Rather than flying off, the wasp landed on her leg, where he swatted it with the flat of his hand.

‘Sorry, I hope you don’t bruise easily,’ he said.

She could still hear the buzzing, even angrier than before. Like a small sullen mob, a swarm was hovering over some half-eaten burgers and an open coke on a nearby blanket. The couple had gone off to swim. She’d watched them surreptitiously, especially the lad. Hair as long and black and glossy as Graham’s.

‘Tell me about this bloke you used to go round with.’

Startled, Caroline dropped what was left of her ice cream. Ben cleared it up, then moved their towels away from the sticky patch on the grass. But he hadn’t forgotten his question.

‘What was he like?’

‘Who?’

‘Your boyfriend. The painter who got killed by that gang.’

‘If you mean Graham, he wasn’t my boyfriend. Just one of my crew.’

‘Got a picture of him?’

‘No. But there might have been one in the newspapers, if you’re interested.’ She rose to her feet. ‘Let’s go cool off. That horrible buzzing is giving me a headache.’

‘I don’t hear anything.’ Ben took her outstretched hand. ‘You need to turn down your volume control.’ He put his lips to her ear and whispered, then grinned when she blushed. ‘You see? Turn it even lower.’

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The baby looks like Ben. His mum says he screamed like her too. ‘Five and a half months straight, day and night. Nearly drove me barmy, it did,’ she says with relish, the way some women will brag about their gall bladders. ‘They say it’s a sign of *creativity*.’ Intones the word in a hushed reverential tone, as though it were a prayer. The new religion. You try not to wonder whether Graham’s children would have looked like him, been as gifted or as gentle. You’ve read about alternative universes. Maybe those children are out there somewhere—lives that could have, should have been.

You go into the bathroom and express some milk into the washbasin. You’ve got plenty, no need to save it for the baby like in those early days. Though your T-shirt and jeans are stained, there’s no place to wash them. The bathtub is still smeared with paint, the Red Pepper which Graham always used in his tag. You thrust your head under the tap and turn the cold water on. For a moment you think it’s going to work. Five minutes of quiet is all you need to be able to hear the baby. You’ve always had such keen hearing.

beepbeepbeep

A sob escapes from your throat. You have to find her, Ben will go mad if she’s not clean and fed.

Tears running down your cheeks, you return to the computer. ‘Graham,’ you whisper, waiting for his photo to load. Then he’s smiling at you, surrounded by kids, the sun in his eyes and the platypus from the children’s zoo cradled in his arms. A hot Saturday in July. You

lean your head against the monitor. ‘Hey,’ he said, ‘your turn. She doesn’t bite. Come and hold her.’

There’s a click from the door to the flat, and you hear it swing open, then slam shut. You hear footsteps. When you turn your head, Ben is standing in the doorway.

‘Look what I’ve brought Jo-Jo,’ he says.

He holds up a mobile—pretty butterflies and bees and a hummingbird.

‘It even makes sounds for her to listen to.’ He winds it, and above the beeping in the room you suddenly hear buzzing—the loud angry buzzing of a swarm of wasps.

‘No,’ you cry. ‘Stop!’

‘*Now* what the fuck’s the matter with you?’ He strides towards her, then stops and looks round. ‘What’s that weird smell? Have you been cooking liver again? You know how much I hate it.’

A platypus squeaks and clucks and bubbles like a baby, but growls when threatened. Quickly you turn back to the monitor. Come on, Graham says, don’t be afraid. ‘Are you sure?’ you whisper. Of course, he answers. There are so many secure sites. Together, we’ll hit them one by one. His soft laugh. They’ll never tag us.

And just before you click *enter* and all noise ceases, you remember. You’ve buried the growls outside in the wheelie bin.