

NOISE

by

Mark Dwortzan

Without warning, they pierced the double-paned windows of Alice's sixth-floor dorm room and the pores of her pale skin. There was no escape. Exhaling hard, the NYU freshman sprang out of her Aeron chair and landed on her twin bed.

"What's wrong?" said her roommate, Sylvia, looking up from her keyboard. Bronzed by the late summer sun and half-smiling, she resembled the miniature Buddha on her desk.

Alice narrowed her gaze. "Don't you notice them?"

"Notice what?" Sylvia plucked some lint out of her kinky, dark-brown hair.

"The sirens."

"What sirens?"

"You know, the ambulances, the fire engines, the police cars. At least one every twenty-eight minutes. Even at night I hear them!"

Sylvia threw up her hands. "Well, that's Manhattan for you. The city that never sleeps. You'll get used to it."

Alice fumed. During occasional day trips into Manhattan from her bucolic home in Long Island, the city had never seemed this noisy. *What if I have to return to Dad's?* she wondered, eyeing the Day Runner that charted her uncertain future in discrete, hourly segments. She tugged at her straight auburn hair, still neck-length as it was half a lifetime ago.

She then recalled the time, at age nine, when she had laughed hysterically at a Dilbert strip her mother had taped to the stainless steel refrigerator in their Massapequahome. Alice's prolonged cackle had penetrated her father's immaculate home office, dislodging the 150-pound computer-programming consultant from the flow state that he, Gordon Alcott, Jr., carefully cultivated every business day. Standing in the doorway in his wrinkle-resistant khakis and pinpoint oxford shirt, her father had exploded without warning.

"Shaddaaaaaaaap!" he boomed, shaking Alice's slender, four-foot frame to the core and causing her green eyes to well up. "Can't you see I've got work to do?"

As Gordon slammed his door, Alice raced down to her "fallout shelter," a windowless shoebox of a room in the basement. As always, she took refuge at her own workstation—an antique desk filled with sketch pencils, oil pastels, and watercolors. After past incidents she had channeled her rage into detailed depictions of sunsets, mountains, and flowers. But this time she had reached the point of implosion.

Now, facing down the sirens of Manhattan from her uncluttered desk, Alice felt no less rattled. Over the next hour, she attempted to tackle the fall semester's first writing assignment, a 500-word essay on her highest aspirations—a self-sustaining career as an artist and a remote seaside cottage. But occasional street noises, from the screech of a skidding yellow taxi to the whistle of a police officer, stopped her in her tracks. Yet another siren?

“Quiet and calm, calm and quiet,” she told herself while inserting two orange foam earplugs she’d purchased after dinner at the dorm convenience store. “Blocks up to 29 decibels,” promised the bold print on the box. The product appeared to live up to its billing: in the next hour, she knocked out 300 words.

But the moment Alice clicked on the “File: Save” icon, a loud noise breached her foam line of defense. Her narrow shoulders tensed. At first she imagined it was her father yelling *Shaddaaaaaaaap*, but then recognized yet another ambulance passing through. Instinctively, she snatched a sketchpad from her file drawer and drew a young woman dodging snowballs.

That night she dreamed of living in an igloo.

* * *

Coated by a fresh blanket of snow, Alice’s new neighborhood appeared as she had pictured it from the off-campus housing database entry. Regal oaks lined empty roads dotted by stately homes with expansive lawns, wrought iron fences, and long driveways. Brick driveways graced with BMWs and Jaguars deposited unseen passengers into remote-controlled garages.

“Scarsdale’s even deader than Massapequa,” she e-mailed her sixteen-year-old sister, Tess, the day in January that she moved in to the Korsakov-Steins’. “And it’s only a 45-minute train ride from Manhattan!”

Alice savored the innocuous white noise of swaying trees and winter winds. What a far cry from the wail of sirens, the whirr of traffic, the *rat-a-tat-tat* of Sylvia’s keyboard, and the thump of dorm-room stereos. That first week, the whole house felt like a sanctuary. And a

private one to boot: the Korsakov-Steins, both lawyers, had fled to Boca to shed parkas and workloads.

Invigorated by morning sessions in NYU's art studios and afternoon walks through stands of white pine, maple, and beech behind the spacious backyard, she completed homework assignments in record time. By the night Zachary and Yelena Korsakov-Stein returned, she had moved on to pleasure reading. But her pleasurable moments were numbered.

Curled up that Sunday evening with a frayed copy of Thoreau's *Walden*, Alice noted a muffled sound emanating from beyond her bedroom door. Her pulse quickened. Instinctively, she tiptoed around the room, wall by wall, pressing an ear against the cool white plaster until she pinpointed the master bedroom, just down the hallway, as the source. Then the volume went way up. Breathless, she thrust her ear harder against the far wall.

"Zeerchary!" Yelena bellowed. "I will not let Yuri and Stacy sleep in the guest room! Not under my roof!"

"But they're over eighteen, Yelena. They're adults!" Zachary's voice projected a heavy bass component, like a dorm-party stereo.

"But they're not may-reed!"

"For God's sake, they live together!"

Lasting fifteen minutes, the bickering reminded Alice of her parents, who sometimes fought into the night. When her father raised his voice, Alice often pressed an ear to the wall, but she never could discern the object of his wrath.

“Quiet and calm, calm and quiet,” she now assured herself and dove into bed. But seconds later a loud broadcast from the Korsakov-Stein radio penetrated her thin walls. Picturing a one-way train ticket to Massapequa, Alice reached for a fresh pair of earplugs.

She spent the next week on alert, replacing earplugs, which she found increasingly uncomfortable, with a Bach CD on auto-repeat. As feared, the Korsakov-Steins raised their voices every evening and tuned in to conservative talk radio until dawn. Bach couldn't compete. Alice longed to say something, but whenever she encountered her landlords, she held herself in. By that Sunday, however, she had reached the point of implosion.

Upon hearing Yelena trudge down to the basement, Alice grabbed her laundry basket. As she descended the stairway, she recalled the first time she had ever tried to confront her father.

An hour after the Dilbert incident, when her mother rang the dinner bell, Alice emerged from the “fallout shelter” with her latest sketch. Seated at the kitchen table before a plate of rib steak, potatoes, and peas, she clutched the drawing with a shaky hand.

“How was work today, love?” said her mother, a pallid, petite brunette wrapped in a gray cardigan and checkered skirt that reminded Alice of Tess's Catholic school uniform.

“Work was outstanding, Greta,” Gordon declared, rubbing his graying crew cut with gusto. “I finally debugged that program.” He stabbed a piece of steak and dangled it midair.

Eyes glazed and right foot jiggling, Alice waited as Gordon described his latest computer algorithm in painstaking detail. Behind a frozen smile, Greta also waited, just as she kept quiet

every workday while her husband holed up in the office from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. sharp. When Gordon called on Alice to report on her day, she felt as if she'd been yanked from a dream.

“School was *outstanding*,” she reported. “Before I knew it, it was 2:46 and time to go. Then I came home and drew this picture.”

“May I see it, Ally?” said Gordon, licking his wafer-thin lips.

“See it? Sure.” Alice passed the sketch to her sister, who ogled it before handing it over. Tess swallowed a giggle as Alice, heart pummeling her rib cage, awaited Gordon's response.

Now, as the 18-year-old Alice prepared to confront her landlord, she felt that same heart pounding. Inside the steamy, cavernous laundry room, she found Yelena folding a towel.

“So, how ees everything?” her landlord said, eyes ablaze.

Alice froze. For the first time, the lawyer's incisive gaze, close-cropped gray hair, and military posture reminded her of her father. “Wonderful,” she reported. “I love the trees.”

“Aren't they lovely in the snow? I'm so glad this is vorking out for you, dear.”

“Well, for the most part,” said Alice, sweating copiously. “There is one thing—”

“Yes?” Yelena dropped the towel and folded her arms.

Alice braced herself against the handles of her laundry basket. “On some evenings I find it hard to study when you and Mr. Korsakov-Stein, um . . .”

“Ven ve vat?” Yelena's eyes widened.

“When you raise your voices.”

“You *hear* us!”

“Yes.” Quivering like a metronome, Alice added, “I can also hear your radio all night.”

Yelena cupped her hands over her cheeks. “Oy, sorry. Ve’ll keep it down, don’t worry.”

The next week the master bedroom went silent. The following week a few arguments crossed the line. But gradually, the radio volume increased. Despondent, Alice resumed using earplugs. But the tactic worked only until that spring, when lawn-mower season began.

The first time the roar of multiple mowers sliced through her 29-decibel earplugs at 6:30 a.m., Alice seized a sketchpad. She drew a woman standing before an oncoming riding mower and raising her arms in defiance, like the boy who held off a tank during the Tiananmen Square revolt. Alice had always admired that boy.

* * *

Young stalks of corn swayed gently in the breeze in fields that touched verdant mountains and a cobalt sky. *I’ve finally found my piece of heaven*, thought Alice as she took in the view from the Greyhound bus window. *I wish I’d moved here in the first place.*

That June, thanks to an online ad in *The Village Voice*, Alice landed on a family farm near the Adirondack foothills. Enrolled in a new distance learning program at NYU, she planned to fulfill all liberal arts requirements remotely before returning to campus in January to focus on studio work. Her satellite office: a fully equipped cottage thirty yards from the Kelly farmhouse.

On her first day at the farmstead, Alice zipped through a René Magritte biography for an elective on the surrealists. She stopped at 11:30 p.m. and stood outside to peer at the blackest, most star-studded sky she’d ever beheld. She could have stared for hours into that static, lifeless

void, but her Day Runner beckoned. At midnight she climbed into a queen-size bed beside an antique armoire, and found nirvana: not a single voice, electronic or animate, could be detected.

By the next morning, however, nirvana had flown the coop. At 5:30 a.m. the clarion call of nearby roosters jolted Alice out of a deep sleep. The roosters also got the Kelly family dogs rolling; all five howled with abandon.

Alice yelled at the offending canines as she snagged a fresh pair of earplugs. She then remembered a time four years earlier, when her mother had spent a week at Tranquility Base, a retreat in Wisconsin for anxious people. Every morning before school at 7:30 a.m., her father had pounded on Alice's door, barking, "Get up!" until he could hear her feet hit the floor.

Soon after the dogs settled down, a fleet of tractors revved up. "Can't anyone see I've got work to do?" Alice shouted. She then wondered if she could endure three more years of living at home, of swallowing her voice. At least it would be quiet most of the time, she reasoned.

At noon a crop duster rumbled overhead. Pressing the earplugs in deeper, Alice imagined catching the next plane to Tranquility Base. And then she painted a woman floating above clouds.

* * *

Through binoculars, Alice watched two blue jays dart along a pine grove hundreds of feet below her new home, a furnished log cabin rental perched halfway between the tree line and a mountain peak in the Adirondacks. Until first snowfall, she planned to live here in total silence.

"It's so quiet up here, I can almost hear my own heartbeat," Alice e-mailed Tess upon her arrival that July. "You'd really love it." In just one week on the mountain, Alice had completed a

month of art history assignments. Still living by her Day Runner, she broke only for the call of nature, meals, or weekly grocery runs to the valley.

At first she luxuriated in the silence. But by the end of the second week, that same silence began to peck away at her. *If only I had a boyfriend*, she scribbled feverishly in a bedside journal that Saturday night. *Or a friend, period. I could die up here, and nobody would know for days!* The next morning Alice tried to rifle through *King Lear* but couldn't get past the opening act. She grabbed the journal and scrawled: *Will I pass this semester or drop out? Will I have to beg Dad to let me come home? Will I end up a virgin AND a wage slave?*

How loud these thoughts were! Not a decibel below the roosters, the lawn mowers, even the sirens. Slamming the journal shut, Alice headed down the mountain in search of distraction.

"Quiet and calm," she insisted as she followed the dirt trail to the valley. About halfway down she came upon a compact, white-haired man in gray sweats perched cross-legged upon a rocky outcropping. As Alice approached, he stared straight ahead. Noting his scraggly ponytail, she recognized him as a cashier from the valley supermarket. Now his vacant eyes alarmed her.

He pressed his palms together and bowed. "*Namaste*," he said, quietly.

"Are you okay?" she whispered.

The man broke into a smile. "I'm fine," he said. "I was just meditating."

"Meditating?"

"Quieting the mind, one breath at a time. Ever tried it?"

Alice shrugged her shoulders. Recalling her journal entries, she said, "Maybe I should."

"There's no time like the present, as we say in the biz."

“The biz?”

He handed her a business card. “The name’s Kaplansky. I lead groups at ClearingHouse when I’m not bagging your groceries, Alice. It’s a quarter mile down the trail.”

Alice blanched. “How did you know my name?”

“People tell me I don’t miss a thing,” he said, eyeing her from head to toe in one swift motion like a grocery scanner. “And from the looks of you, you could use a little meditation.”

The following afternoon Alice joined Kaplansky and six other ClearingHouse meditators on an expansive blue floor mat beneath the rafters of a one-room cabin. “Begin to breathe deeply,” he said. “Breathe in, breathe out. In, out. On each out-breath say a word in your mind, a one-syllable mantra such as ‘one’ or ‘om.’ Whenever your mind distracts you from present-moment awareness, simply say to yourself, ‘Thinking, thinking,’ and return to the breath.”

Following Kaplansky’s instruction, Alice uttered *om* repeatedly. Rather than quieting her mind, however, the practice surfaced more unpleasant thoughts, including one indelible memory.

At dinner on the night of the Dilbert incident, Gordon inspected her artwork like an architect reviewing a blueprint. There was no mistaking the hunched shoulders, the short bangs, the freckles, the blazing eyes. Looming above the girl, in khakis and pinpoint oxford shirt, a faceless man was shown tightening the screw of a vise clamping down on her head. Hoping and fearing her father would “get it,” Alice repeatedly twirled a lock of her neck-length hair.

Gordon cleared his throat. “Nice use of perspective on the clamp,” he said. “But the lighting and proportions are all wrong. You didn’t pay attention to that in art class, *did you?*”

The words pierced Alice down to the bone, like a fresh dose of *Shaddaaaaaaap!* She nearly choked on a chunk of steak. Tongue-tied through dessert, she fled to her bedroom afterwards. Breathing rhythmically beneath a goose down comforter, she unwittingly invented her very first mantra. “Quiet and calm, calm and quiet,” she murmured.

“Thinking, thinking,” she now repeated on the ClearingHouse mat, as memories of her father’s tirades and visions of her inevitable January return to the NYU soundscape vied for mental airtime. Only at rare moments did she elude the clamor of past and future concerns and bask in the sanctuary of the present moment, what Kaplansky called “the ultimate quiet state.”

After the 45-minute session, when Alice briefed her teacher on her struggle to achieve that state, he smiled broadly. “Try sitting with these thoughts some more,” he said. “By observing them like passing clouds, they tend to dissolve over time.”

For the next ten weeks, Alice hit the blue mat every Monday, all sessions penned in her Day Runner. But by late September, she still couldn’t turn down the volume on her father’s *Shaddaaaaaaap!* and Manhattan’s impending sirens. After one session, Kaplansky suggested, “If you can’t clear the past and future on the mat, you probably need to clear them off the mat.”

* * *

Opening his door the next day at 6:00 p.m., Gordon appeared relaxed in his navy wool sweater, jeans, and clogs. “What are you doing here, Alice?” he said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Dad.” Alice breathed deeply, fixating on *om* as she approached him. *I can actually handle this!* she convinced herself. *Oops! Thinking, thinking . . .*

“What a nice surprise,” said her father, opening his arms as if to offer a hug.

Alice backed away and unzipped her backpack.

Gordon dropped his arms. “Mom and Tess should be back soon from the mall.”

“Actually, I came to see you. Can we speak in your office?”

“Sure.” He showed his daughter the guest chair and sat behind his massive, L-shaped oak desk. As Alice pulled five drawings from her pack, he glanced at the image on his mint-condition desk blotter, a depiction of the eagle from the dollar bill clutching olive branches rather than arrows in its left talon, and the words “Tranquility Base . . . The eagle has landed.”

“I brought some artwork that I’d like to tell you about,” Alice said firmly. She then looked her father in the eye for seconds on end, perhaps for the first time ever.

“Remember this one?” she said, placing a yellowed sketch on the desk blotter. “I drew it the day you snapped at me for laughing in the kitchen. That’s me getting squeezed by the vise, which is exactly what it felt like every time you yelled at me or criticized my drawings—”

Gordon gasped. “I remember that one—and many others from that time. You showed great promise as an artist from a very young age.”

“Great promise?” she said, her voice quaking.

He sighed. “The exact words my grade school teachers used when I produced artwork of this caliber. If only I had lived up to that promise. Who knew I’d end up in a job I can’t stand?”

Alice’s jaw dropped. “I had no idea.”

“But *you*, Alice, you’re a natural-born artist. I should never have pushed you so hard.”

Was this some kind of show? Alice wondered. *Or had Dad's eyes just welled up?*

Anxious to preserve the latter interpretation for eternity, she raised her right hand like a traffic cop. "No need to say anything more right now, Dad. Better to take some deep breaths."

For a few seconds, they stared at each other in silence, breathing. With each in-breath, Alice tried to clear accumulated anger over past incidents that her mind had amplified over the years; with each out-breath, she strived to cultivate compassion for her father's plight.

She focused on *om* as her mother and Tess barged in, as they all shared a heavy meatloaf dinner and light conversation, as her father let slip a sarcastic taunt, as she slid beneath her well-worn down comforter and plucked her Day Runner from the nightstand. Breathing in, and then out, she flipped the calendar to the next day and marked "Clear the future" in the 9:00 a.m. slot.

* * *

At 9:00 a.m. sharp, Alice entered the NYU housing office and snagged a free PC. Minutes later, she printed out an ad for a vacant studio unit at Hayden Hall.

"I'd like to apply for this room," she announced to a deskbound, fiftyish administrator as a fire engine siren sounded. *That's just a call to return to the breath*, she reminded herself.

The woman adjusted her reading glasses. "I must level with you about this unit."

"What do you mean?"

"The girl who vacated this unit left because she found her suitemates too noisy. Unfortunately, it's the only unoccupied single room we've got. Still interested?"

Alice recoiled as she imagined, on one hand, blasting stereos, booming keg party voices, and blaring sirens. And on the other, a job she couldn't stand. She took a corrective in-breath.

“Are you okay?”

Breathing out, Alice tried to focus on the sound of *om*. “Thinking, thinking,” she said.

THE END