

## Maji Avenue

Julie Ferris could never fall asleep with her ear directly on the pillow. It caused a certain disconcerting awareness of her heartbeat inside her skull, and, comfortable though a particular position in her bed might be, the steady *thrum-thrum-thrum* of her own pulse unnerved her. Try as she might to ignore it, to range her thoughts far and wide in an effort to attain sleep, her mind would always come back to her pulse. Then, of course, it would pick up speed, and she would become aware of that too. It became a cycle: Julie forcing her mind in other directions in an attempt to relax, her thoughts boomeranging back to the rhythmic sound of her own vitality. She would often think back to a PBS show she had once watched about Russian Olympic athletes using biofeedback to control functions once thought involuntary; she had even turned it into an 8th grade health class report about people *thinking* their hearts to slow down.

It was no use. The gentle beating in her ear, both muffled and amplified by the softness of the pillow, would unerringly quicken and become more forceful, and her resolve would crumble. Unless she had been drinking - which occurred more nights than not, lately - she would give up with a sigh and roll onto her back. It was less comfortable, with her back pain, but the eardrum-throb of her heart would fade, washed away by the low-grade symphony of sounds offered up nightly by the city. A muted cacophony of sirens and dump trucks, laughing late night revelers and rumbling rap music bass from passing cars was her nightly lullaby. It did not entirely drown out her husband's ragged

snores from the next room over, nor the arguing of her neighbors one door down, but it was something benign to focus on and fade into, until fitful sleep came at last.

Her chronic anxiety had been worsening of late, as her marriage dissolved from within but showed no sign of actually ending, like a hard-boiled left out far too long, rotten liquifaction held in place by a stubborn shell. *You're so pretty*, her friends would tell her; you can find someone who will treat you like you deserve. "You're so pretty," they told her, and she was, with her Mae West body and a Vivien Leigh glare, and she melted the hearts of many men. But kids make it hard to break away. So she stayed, smiling bravely for her three girls during the day, pouring drinks for herself at night, tall glasses of Crown Royal under Nash's disapproving (and envious) glare. She ignored him, this currently-sober drunk, and claimed the bedroom as her own night after night, the whiskey and the sound of the traffic bearing her like a wounded soldier on a stretcher into the land of oblivion, at least for a few precious hours.

It was her daily cycle: wake, feed the girls and walk them to the bus stop, hustle herself into exhaustion for 12 bucks an hour, get off work and argue with Nash if he was home, pour herself a drink if he wasn't, pour herself into her girls when they came clambering off the bus, pour herself into bed at last (avoiding her ear directly on the pillow), drift off to the sound of the city. The routine of it was beginning to etch itself into her brain in some subconscious way, and on whatever level she was willing to admit it to herself, her life was a metaphor for the city, and the city for her life. There were a thousand beginnings and just as many endings; there was chaos and there was order; there were

tiny victories that sustained her and there were minor setbacks that threatened to collapse the whole system. The days dragged on, but before she knew it, years had flown by, and all she had to look forward to at the end of each day was whiskey and water and the soothing voice of traffic.

She did her best not to think of it all, but when those thoughts did seep back in, like the unwelcome sound of her own pulse, she knew in her heart that it was all unsustainable. One Saturday morning in the park with the girls, she had made the mistake of glancing up and around her, and realized with a dark and icy feeling in her heart that she could see the skyscrapers and factories easily through the trees. As her daughters laughed and argued and played for a few stolen minutes, the sudden realization that the park was just an illusion made her shiver; and Nash was off work that day as well, waiting back in their apartment. She would try to maintain distance, but she knew she they would fight. They always did.

More often now than ever, her life had the feeling of a mirage. From the grins on her children's' faces to the cold solidness of the city around her, she was beginning to have the idea that all of it could be pulled away quite easily, if one could only figure out just where to grasp it. These were only brief flashes of thoughts, accompanied by vague disruptions in her field of vision, and she could push them away, without much effort. But it was occurring several times a day now, especially when she presumed that she should be the happiest, and in fact this was when it was the worst, thoughts bent ever

inward and outward at the same time, and with these flashes came the subconscious belief that perhaps she was already dead.

Nighttime risks began to be taken, in the form of extra shots of whiskey mixed with a shrug or two, and new and varied sleeping medications from the city's seemingly endless supply of doctors. She'd notice her pulse seemed to be slowing, despite her twin demons of anxiety and detachment, if by chance she laid her head sideways against the pillow. She still couldn't tolerate it, and would always have to roll to her back, the murmur of the world outside her window her final reassurance before dropping off; but her heart definitely was slowing down. She'd asked a few of the doctors about it, but none of them had acted concerned, and this was enough for her, enough to get out of their offices before their faces could shimmer too much, into nonexistence, taking the world with it. It was then a dash to the pharmacy, avoiding eye-contact if at all possible, and back to work, to the bus stop, to the liquor cabinet, to her bed.

Slow, now, very slow, it seemed to her, her heart rate in her ear, and she took to checking it, on nights when she wasn't too intoxicated. Almost as if she was preparing herself to hibernate. A few beats per minute, it seemed, and her thoughts slowing with it. Then she would shift, and the only real thing was the city's voice. Actually, the sound of it was all that sustained her through her endless days, now. It became what was true. She was drinking close to an entire bottle of Crown every night, and her children tucked themselves, her mumbled "goodnights" blankly reflected by their frowns and troubled glances, or to the best that preteen girls could hide worry.

Her heart hardly beat at all anymore, and she found that she could fall asleep with her ear mashed against the soft cotton and down. On one of these nights, the voice of the city was especially loud, almost jovial, like a friend who's had too much to drink (which she found funny without laughing, because she herself had mixed and consumed a particularly strong cocktail of whiskey and pills). She could hear the tinkling of wine glasses; she heard a hundred happy conversations at once, and a woman's shrill laughter ringing out, heard people bumming cigarettes. She heard car horns, but they beeped in polite, almost apologetic tones, then the cars that owned those horns motored on. The garbage trucks performed their usual routine, their breaks and horns making prehistoric sounds, but it was pleasing. For the briefest of moments, she thought she heard Nash and the girls outside on the street, giggling and carrying on in an anticipatory fashion, as though they were on their way to see a long-awaited movie. With these sounds, her eyes closed at last, and the world lost its fractured quality, and she felt peace. No heartbeat, only tranquility.

There was warm sunlight *flowing* through her window when she awoke, and her first thought was that she was going to be late for work. She felt no anxiety, though, and sat up slowly and thoughtfully. Maybe it was Saturday, but she listened and did not hear Nash's heavy footsteps in the other rooms of the apartment, did not hear obnoxious sounds of cartoons from the girls watching TV. In fact, she heard none of the usual sounds of her days, not even the steady strobe of traffic outside her window. She put her palm against her ear: nothing. She was beginning to think that somehow she had

gone deaf, that the booze and the prescriptions rotted the nerves that lead from her eardrum to her brain, but there was no panic with this thought. Then there was the familiar trill of a bird from the trees that lined the street of Majie Avenue, and she knew she had not lost her hearing.

She parted her blinds and stared down at the silent city. There were people out there, but they were simply standing on the street, or sitting on bus stop benches. They did not speak. Aside from this, they seemed quite alive and completely normal, dressed for their day, as she had seen them (or imagined she'd seen them) a thousand times before. Still, there was something else wrong, and it took Julie a minute to recognize it. They were all staring up at her window...staring up at her, faces pleasant and unblinking. She backed away from the window and turned towards her bedroom door, pausing before walking through it, though she felt no fear. At last she walked barefoot up and down her hallways. Nash and the girls were gone.

Without looking at any of the clocks in her apartment, she showered and dressed, pulling on a t-shirt and her most comfortable pair of jeans. She slipped her feet into flip-flops, and left the apartment. Her neighbors stood in the hallway as she walked past them, looking at her with cryptic expressions that most closely approximated serene sympathy. They did not speak to her, and she made no attempt to talk to them, and was mildly surprised to find that felt not even the barest impulse to do so. Slipping into the elevator, she wondered if it would function. It did. In fact, *everything* seemed to function just fine; there was simply nobody *making* things function. As the elevator let

her out on the ground floor, she could hear cars idling on the street past the lobby, but no one was actually driving. She heard the faint hum of fluorescent lights overhead as she walked towards the glass doors that opened onto Maji Avenue, and as she reached the door, it opened automatically, just as it normally would.

Out on the street, people were everywhere, but there was none of the usual city bustle. No one jockeyed for position at the crosswalks, nobody gunned car engines at stoplights (though the lights flicked patiently and dutifully through their usual cycles). All around her, the city was alive, but it did not move. There were street kids with hooded sweatshirts pulled up against the morning wind, and working moms with babies in one arm and briefcases in the other. Men in business suits, and construction workers with bright orange vests and heavy work boots. They stood or sat idly, watching her as she stood on the curb, breathing what felt like the sweetest air she had ever known. Not one of them moved, no one seemed impatient; she looked around at them, but felt no alarm. She recognized their faces, oh, so vaguely, and she knew that she must have passed them on the street or seen them at her job or *something*, but had never given them a second thought. Yet her mind, her essence, had retained them, somehow. As in her apartment building, not one of them spoke to her, but only regarded her with their enigmatic, bare smiles. None of their faces wavered when she looked directly at them, and the world had a decidedly *real* feeling to it.

She stepped off the curb and into Maji Avenue, crossing towards the median without a look to her left or right. No one moved to stop her or intervene, and there was no need to,

anyway; no tires screeched, no horns blared. She reached the median, scattering a group of pigeons, and then crossed the other lanes without incident. She kept walking, knowing without knowing that she was heading in the direction of the park. Children sat quietly in the grass, plucking clovers and glancing up at her with their sweet and innocent smiles; an obviously homeless man smiled the same smile as the children, but looked away shyly as he held open the wrought-iron park gate for her.

Julie looked up and around her. It was a pretty day, late spring, almost summer, and the trees were fully leafed, branches swaying in the puffs of morning breeze, which was now warming nicely. Birds danced in the joy of young life, and squirrels chased each other down one trunk and up another. Again she noticed the office towers and warehouse buildings faintly in the background, but felt none of the cold fear that before had squeezed her heart. People sat on park benches with books folded in their laps, or stood side-by-side, holding hands, still silent, still watching her, still smiling kindly and blandly. She heard not a single car, truck, or bus sound, and when she looked up at a gorgeous blue sky, there were no contrails of jets passing high overhead. She realized, without surprise, that she was walking towards the center of the park, towards the fountain she had once loved, a place where she had spent peaceful afternoons and romantic evenings.

The fountain was running; she could hear it's calling, bubbling voice before she could even see it, and then it was in view, glints of sun catching individual droplets and turning them into dazzling jewels, before they crashed back down into the pool and became part



of the whole again. The fountain was ringed with old but regal benches, the same wrought metal as the gate at the entrance of the park, and she could make out figures seated quietly in them, and could tell, even from a distance, that they were looking at her. On one of the benches, on the opposite side of the splashing, playful water, she could make out four figures, seated, and she felt a warmth inside of her.

It was a middle-aged man and three pre-teen girls. The girls kicked their legs playfully and giggled, but said nothing. The man smiled broadly and nervously, as if he were about to ask Julie out on a date, but was almost too shy. Something inside of her leaped with joy, and she knew that it was Nash and their daughters, waiting for her. Julie stopped in front of the bench, and the five of them smiled at each other; not the secret, Buddha-like smiles everyone else wore, but real smiles of gratitude and happiness, bordering on both grins and tears.

Here was the man with whom she had so madly fallen in love, and not the one stripped down to a walking corpse by alcohol and affairs and fights. Here was the man who had proposed to her next to this very fountain. Here was the handsome man who had created three beautiful girls with her. Here were her three daughters, incredibly young and full of life and full of promise, not the sullen and slovenly pre-teens she had known of late. Here were the babies she had cradled, one by one, exhausted but instantly in love, as each one arrived screaming and very much alive into this world. Julie stared at the four of them, and none of their faces rippled or shimmered, and she was certain that

whatever was going to be ripped away already had been, somehow, during one of the past several nights.