

MEMORY'S NOISE

"Happy New Year!" Edwin hears someone shout. It's a beautiful stranger, smiling. She's got young, green eyes and joyful energy. But the rest of her face is a blur. She walks into the crowd and disappears.

Fireworks go off.

One of the nicest greetings a person could offer, Edwin thought. *Happy New Year*. New beginnings, good things to come. So many new years he's traveled through—79 now. Or is it already 80?

The fireworks seem to have a rhythm to them, perfectly timed. And they're so loud. His whole life's been one loud batch of noise after another. But he's never lost his hearing—sometimes he almost envies friends who have. All the noise has added up over the years and worn him out. A little quiet could be a good thing. A little deafness, and maybe he could block out the world a bit.

It was construction he did for work, back then before he retired. Always noisy. The demolition crews when they came in with their drills and bulldozers, the excavators and dump

trucks with their beeping when they moved in reverse. The crushing of bricks and concrete unloading. Jackhammers tearing into cement. Those things, too, seemed to have a rhythm. Did he always notice this, or is he just remembering now? Each machine would take its solo, showing off its own sound, before the next one took over. He thought of kids' toys, dumping and digging and calling for attention. Even the cries of his younger sister, when he was just a little boy, are coming back to him now. She would cry, then stop, then cry again, back and forth like that. Edwin would cover his ears.

His wife Nora, before she died, had noise and rhythm to her too. She had a high-pitched voice and tended to repeat herself. After a tiring day of work he'd come home and sometimes have trouble deciphering what she was saying—he only heard a kind of beeping sound, echoing those trucks in perpetual reverse, the baby wailing her patterned cry. What *was* Nora telling him, all those years? He's not sure. This makes Edwin sad, because he really did love her and it would have been good to know what she wanted to say. It occurs to him now: she went to her grave without ever really being heard, didn't she? Sometimes you can make a lot of sounds and still never get through. Edwin feels bad about this, so bad that the colorful sky begins to blur and he has to blink faster to clear it up.

The fireworks are still erupting. It crosses his mind: take a video with his phone, show it to the grandkids. But where's the phone? Wasn't it in his pocket? Or did they say no phones were allowed? That's right, they don't want you to have your phone on you. No videos, then. The grandkids will have to watch their own fireworks. They must be watching them now anyway. Sherrie wouldn't let them miss out on New Year's Eve. He hopes the fireworks aren't too loud for the kids. They're starting to pound in his own ears.

It must have been Vietnam where Edwin first paid attention to rhythm. He had a comrade who liked music. What was his name again? Chuck. Chuck, Chuck, Chuck...his name comes back now like steady gunshots. Ed didn't know much about music. He liked Chuck, always humming or slapping beats on his legs. Chuck was almost music itself—Ed can't really recall what his face looked like, but he remembers the sound of him. Did Chuck survive his time in Vietnam? Edwin doesn't know—or he can't remember.

Chuck showed him how syncopated rhythms worked, straying from the downbeats. Ed hears him tapping on his legs now— a basic, steady beat on one leg and a syncopated rhythm on the other.

"What if you lose one of those legs?" Ed asked him.

"I'll use my other arm."

Another hazy memory, returning to him now. It surfaces almost out of nowhere. They were hiding in a ditch together. It was very loud, and frightening. Down on the ground. Chuck had grabbed him and thrown him down there. Mud. Gunshots.

Now the memory drills back into his ears. The shots kept going on and on, that night, and down in that ditch Chuck was gently slapping Ed's back. A syncopated rhythm.

Suddenly Edwin sees Chuck in front of him now, in a wheelchair with no legs. He's tapping a rhythm on Ed's arm.

*Fireworks, back to the fireworks!* Edwin tells himself. It's his own hand tapping on his arm, trying to create a pattern with the sparklers in the sky. It seems to be the final run, the grand

finale. The air is lit up with constant explosions. It's almost like an enormous strobe light, and Edwin's getting a headache.

One more memory: the flashing lights of a dance club. Who did he go there with? It couldn't have been Nora. She didn't like that sort of thing. But, yes, he sees it now—it was her under those blinking lights. But he doesn't remember dancing at all. Nora got lost. He was looking for her. The flickering glow and the pulsating beats distracted him, made it hard to find her. Then, there she was. Trying to tell him something, shouting across the room. But once again he couldn't hear her over all the noise.

He wants so badly, now, to know what she was trying to say.

It stops. The fireworks are over.

Edwin is tired. He needs to go home. Where's his car, now? He can't even remember where he parked. His hands fumble along his empty pockets. He doesn't have his keys anyway. They took his keys and his phone. Those things weren't allowed.

He doesn't have the energy to think about it. There's a large padded bench at the patio edge. Miraculously, it's empty. Everyone is shuffling toward the parking lot instead. The year is new and the night is old.

He lies down on the cushioned bench and falls asleep.

"He slept right through it, with all that loud noise. It looks like he's still asleep." It's his daughter Sherrie's voice.

"The anesthesia was mild, but it can work well for these MRI procedures," a man says.

Everything else is quiet now. Edwin is still so tired. He doesn't want to open his eyes. All of the memories he just recalled are slipping away...who were those people again? Nora. He still remembers Nora.

Then Sherrie asks, hesitantly, "How does it look?"

"Well, it's not what we were hoping to see."

Quiet.

"The tumor has grown larger."

"Oh, no."

"This is an image from the MRI we did six months ago, back in September. After the surgery, this mass was significantly reduced. The problem with this type of tumor is that it extends, like tentacles, into the brain tissues around it—so it's difficult to remove completely. From this new MRI, it looks like what remained after the surgery has begun to spread again."

"The radiation isn't helping, then?"

"It's likely helping—the spread could have been much worse if left untreated. I think we should continue the radiation and start chemotherapy as well."

"First my mom...and now this."

"I'm sorry. This is never easy for a family to go through. I'm sure he's missed at the university too."

"Yes, his students adore him. His writing and his courses—they're his world."

University. Writing. Students. Edwin listens, with his eyes closed, to what they are saying. That's right...he's no construction worker. No Vietnam vet. He's a writer and a professor.

Sherrie's sniffing. "Is he ever going to be able to write again?"

"Don't give up hope. Many of his mental functions are still intact."

"It's so hard...to see his memory going."

"I can imagine. He might still have another productive year or two, with the radiation and chemo. It's hard to tell. And I know it's a strange thought, but—memory loss doesn't necessarily stifle creativity. It could even stimulate it."

Quiet. All that noise that had pounded in Edwin's ears has dissipated into a silent void. He begins to realize: the drilling and beeping and hammering—that's what the machine does as it takes its images, the pictures of his brain. The same thing happened last time. But this time it all felt so much more real.

Is Sherrie crying? He doesn't hear anything. The hush surrounds him, constrains him on the padded bench, runs in trickles down his face.

Edwin wishes there were noise.