

White Noise

by J. A. Johnson

He lay on his back, startled to be awake and worrying about what ominous noise might have roused him. He imagined the sound of a knife cutting through the window screen, an elbow crashing through the leaded glass window in the front door. He remembered to breathe—in on a five-count, out on an eight-count—just like his therapist advised. After he calmed himself and stilled his imagination, he was left with the drone of the small fan that sat on her nightstand. He could swear there was honky-tonk music coming from somewhere behind the buzz. Harmonicas. A definite rhythm. Indistinct singing. He listened close, trying to pin down the melody, maybe catch a bit of the lyrics, anything that might prove to himself that the music was real.

The fan had become a necessity in the early days of their marriage. In the apartment next door was a half-deaf widower who fell asleep to Johnny Carson's blaring monologues. "Why can't that old man just turn it down," he'd said. "It's probably the only company he's got," she'd replied. "Besides, there *are* advantages to having your bedroom next to a deaf old coot."

Those were the days when he became truly aware of sound. He'd push the cheap, noisy vacuum across the carpeting and think that he heard something behind the cacophony. Was it his wife calling out for him? Was it the apartment door buzzer? Each time he would shut off the vacuum and listen, only to be greeted by silence.

They bought a house and put the fan on her nightstand. Then for her birthday he bought her an expensive noise machine. It could make the standard mistuned-radio white noise, or it could do crickets, or a babbling stream, or wind rushing through trees. None of these worked, however. Each was somehow annoying or artificial, and so they brought out the fan again.

Their baby was born in the fall. Now when he vacuumed the rugs he thought he heard the boy's mewling. Was he hungry or

hurt? Had his wind-up swing run down? Did he feel scared and alone? He'd shut off the vacuum and listen, and hear nothing but the pounding of his own heart.

On the boy's tenth Christmas Eve they fell asleep on the rug in front of the fireplace. With a suspicious tone of voice the child had asked him if he was a nice boss, if he let his workers go home early on Christmas Eve to be with their kids. In the small hours, when the crackling of the embers had stopped and the room had gone cold, the boiler kicked in and the pipes began to clang. He was half-roused out of his sleep, and then slipped under again to dream of Marley's fettered ghost.

The years buzzed on and so did the fan, masking her restless tossing in bed, masking their son's late-night sneak-ins. When the boy left for college and then for the city, they kept it on, partly out of habit, partly to drown out her trips to the bathroom.

They switched to a canister vacuum, quieter than the upright, but still noisy enough that he was unsure whether he'd heard the phone ring. What if their son was in trouble again? What if it was her doctor? He would switch off the vacuum and listen.

He conceded at last that there was no honky-tonk music playing beyond the curtain of noise. He laughed at himself for having believed it. He laughed again at the absurdity of keeping the fan on all these nights, the absurdity of at least not having moved it to his nightstand. He reached across the bed and turned it off.

The blades spun down to a rest. The boiler switched off and the radiators ticked softly for a few minutes and then went silent. As the quiet of the house closed in on him, he stopped breathing and lay dead still. He felt himself sinking into his bed, like he was the lowest point in a deep valley and every scrap of silence, every unsaid word from every darkened room was pooling around him like cold air. He became aware of his heartbeat, and then of a tinny sound in his ears that made him wonder if he needed to have his blood pressure checked. When he turned on his side he could hear the bounding pulse in his ear echoing off the pillow. When he

couldn't stand it any longer, he drew in a deep breath and then another, thankful for the sound of the air rushing into his lungs. He tried to focus on his breathing—five in, eight out—but he just couldn't slow things down. Finally he reached across and turned the fan back on.

He waited for the honky-tonk music to return, but it didn't. He did pick up a rhythm somewhere in the noise, but now it sounded like a load of laundry in the washer. His breathing eased as he imagined the tiny onsies and bras and boxers dancing in the soapy water. He pushed the covers down to the foot of the bed, wriggled to the middle and stretched his arms wide, palms to the ceiling. He imagined himself floating on still sea, buoyed and bathed in sunshine. He gathered up what was left of the phantom noises behind the fan—the murmurs and indistinct whispers like warm, soft breaths in his ear—and tried to recall the sound of Johnny Carson's voice.

