

# Hiss, Beep, Flutter, and Crunch

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The first sensation she felt every morning was a pain in her legs, tapering at her ankles. She heaved herself onto one side, trying to find the comfort to sleep. It had always struck her as bizarre that one slept for a numbing comfort, but to sleep, one needed to be comfortable. Verging upon eighty-five, Leona found comfort to be increasingly unattainable, always slipping and sliding away from her.

Outside, a boisterous chorus of birds cajoled each other. During her Midwestern youth, Leona struggled with a fear of birds, a fear she never overcame. It was fated now, she thought; she was utterly destined to hate birds.

Swinging her legs over the bed, she waited for her head to stop spinning. She tried to face her aging scientifically, fastidiously noting every ache and pain on an hour-to-hour basis, evaluating the changes. During her morning routine, she had to remember to stretch out her legs and wait for her head to settle. Remembering was part of the battle, too, these days.

Loathe to change her habits, Leona always fixed oatmeal for breakfast. She maintained that she like its mealy taste, but in reality, she consumed it purely to avoid constipation. She'd even begun to add prunes to the breakfast oatmeal, proud that she had accepted her bowels as they were. Her mother never would have, she thought with a giggle.

She pretended that she was hosting a cooking program; "Making Delicious Oatmeal with Leona Harris." First, she measured out the oats and water, pouring them into a clean bowl she'd set the night before. Next she shoved the whole mess into the microwave, which hurt her hands considerably. Thankfully, the stiffness lessened perceptibly by eleven-thirty, but was known to lurk until three, much to her chagrin. Finally, Leona pulled out the steamy oatmeal, which was mushy to her satisfaction and located a crusty spoon.

Was "living room" really a proper moniker for this space? Leona infrequently counted herself among the living, about as lifeless as the dust bunnies on the carpet, she believed. Her collection of overstuffed armchairs also collected dust on top of her ill-received mail. Jerome, her eldest, had recently taken a liking to assisted living and senior home articles from the local paper and had begun mailing them to her. She wondered how he felt inserting those insulting articles in the envelopes and sealing them with his tongue. Did he look closely enough at the brochures to see the grimacing seniors propped up by walkers and underpaid nurses? Or did he take "Happy Oaks," "Pleasant Gardens," and "Gentle Groves" at their names, picturing his own little mother on the cover of future brochures?

Leona forced the thought out of her mind and cleared a space for herself in an armchair to watch her morning supplement of televised rubbish. She had become a routine TV watcher since her husband, Carl, died. This practice of hers was unexpected; she and Carl had strong objections to television and never owned one until all four children had moved out. This lack of television was the talk of their little New York suburb for weeks when the children were young; kids and parents alike were morbidly fascinated. After school, neighborhood kids charitably allowed the four piteous children to watch *Bonanza* or *Gilligan's Island* on their three precious channels until dinnertime. Parents met at their mailboxes to gossip about "those parents who refuse to buy their kids a television." Adults were flummoxed at the decision to deprive the children, as though it were a fundamental American right to bask in the unnatural televised glow.

In her armchair, Leona rapidly flipped between channels, passing with a shudder thought those containing violence. After the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, Leona experienced night terrors that tore screams from her unconscious body. She visualized tiny Asian children in orphanages and in markets toddling after their mothers and then blown to bits by bombs much smaller than they were. The ones that survived would be horribly mangled, she knew, and they who would rebuild proud cities from the body-ridden mess. She saw in her dreams that babies would grow up without parents, and adults would lose hope that their children, by some miracle, survived. She woke up with sodden pillows after especially bad visions. All this was brought on by the gruesome pictures on the television screens in the appliance store window downtown after the war. Walking home from work, she consciously avoided the store, shielding her sanity from the terrible scenes projected into the American people's homes and living rooms.

It was an ominous act, buying the television she now watched. She had begun to take interest in television as her husband Carl's health waned. When he was in the hospital belaboring his breath, she would perch on the bed

with him, watching utterly worthless talk shows (her favorite) or histrionic made-for-TV movies (his). The morning after Carl died at home, Leona went to Sears and bought a television. It was almost like having him there with her.

Mesmerized by the flickering pictures and sporadic noises, her finger stamping through the channels, Leona didn't hear the phone ring. She did, however, hear the blip of her answering machine recording a familiar voice.

"Mrs. Harris, this is Chelsea Bordeau from the Manchester Public Library. We had you scheduled to volunteer in the Children's Section at ten-thirty today? Could you call me please when you get this message as to whether or not you are coming in? Thanks."

Alarmed, Leona shuffled to her room and got dressed, choosing what her son affectionately labeled as her "Kwanza outfit" for its broad, colorful stripes and coordinating hat. She would not be calling Chelsea, she decided then. She tugged at her tote purse and checked that her keys were safely tucked inside. Finding her shoes, she wedged her feet in and wiggled them a bit. She ran a comb through her stiff grey curls, grimacing at her tugs.

Vanity persuaded Leona to examine her reflection in the door mirror before leaving. Standing at a distance, she saw mottled legs encased like sausages in yellowed nylons, stuffed into sneakers beige as skin. Other mornings, she might have wept, but she was late and couldn't be bothered to be disgusted by her body before heading out the door and locking it.

Outside, Leona heard the birds chattering again as she maneuvered down the stairs onto the broad sidewalk. She turned left and proceeded out of her neighborhood of apartments onto Main Street, where she turned right, crossed the street, and hobbled over a curb. She vigorously pounded at the worn button on the light post, pleading with the lights to allow her to cross the street. The voices and thoughts of old women are heard and answered, Leona mused; the white chalk person appeared on the sign across the street. The street was lined with small pieces of litter: bottle tops, cigarette boxes, candy wrappers. Leona noted them all and started up the steep library steps, checking her footing before shifting her weight onto each step.

Leona had been using this library since before the children were born some fifty years ago. When the children grew up, she volunteered at the library almost every day, watching children pull piles of books from the shelves and nap in the stacks. She watched them grow into teenagers and recommended books for them about angst and loss. Frankly, she became the go-to volunteer about Young Adult fiction, a fierce reader of school crushes and lofty ambitions.

The library was almost perfectly circular. On the outset, it had stacks, desks, tables and chairs, but it also had a section for children with dozens of beanbag chairs and a rocking chair for Read Aloud Story Time. Leona's favorites to read to the children were *The Cat in the Hat* and *Jam for Frances*. Leona Harris shuffled behind the check-out desk to the week's volunteer clipboard and checked her name off the date next to Christina Rosenthal and Thomas Kippin. She collected her "My name is Leona Harris. I'd love to help you find a book!" pin and stabbed it into the stiff fabric of her shirt and secured it.

She hiked over to the children's book section, alert for Mrs. Bordeau's bossy footsteps. Leona lowered her backside into a chair and shifted a bit until she was comfortable. As comfortable as she was going to be anyway, she thought cynically.

Behind the romance novel section, Chelsea Bordeau saw Leona Harris come in the library. Chelsea altered her position subconsciously to prevent Leona from seeing her. Leona was an overweight volunteer with bad vision; she wasn't exactly threatening. But Chelsea was wary of the old lady for thick and incomprehensible reasons. Perhaps it was her devotion—she came to the library every single day—even when she was not scheduled to volunteer. Perhaps it was her constant allusions to her children, the eldest of whom Chelsea had dated.

Jerome Harris and Chelsea Kendall, as she had been then, had even been engaged at one time, but in a man's fickle and feckless way, Jerome met his future wife, Sarah, that same summer and married her right away, utterly drenched and sopping with love. He twittered apologies like a tireless bird when he came home with his bride, and Chelsea felt as though she would vomit during the entire sordid conversation. She'd had the strange urge to feed him birdseed and let him eat from her hand, this birdy man she had loved. A month later, she married the new businessman in town, a man with a greasy mustache and hairy feet.

From her hideout behind the shelves, Chelsea saw Leona's head tilt and heard the soft snuffles of an old woman asleep. Anxious about his mother's health, Jerome had called her earlier that week, imploring her to watch Leona. Watch her for what, Chelsea had wondered. Jerome wanted her to watch for signs of senility, signs that his mother was losing touch with reality. Chelsea gazed at the lumpy figure flopped on the armchair. Her own sweet mother had slept like that sometimes, lulled to sleep by the TV's drone and flicker.

Chelsea saw the floppy rabbit that the library kept in homage to *The Velveteen Rabbit*. It was folded in half at the waist, sitting on the ground. It was completely defenseless and could be scooped up by a small child any moment; it was at the whim of anyone. Leona was no more of a problem for Jerome than that rabbit was for Chelsea.

So why was he itching to put her away?

Jerome wanted to put his mother in a nursing home “more than he had ever wanted anything in his life,” he had confessed to her. He had cited that “the safety is superb in many such places,” an idea which seemed irrelevant to Chelsea. Immobile folks are rarely capable of violence, though Leona was capable of nasty insults. But Jerome seemed to be booting her out for his *own* health and safety.

Leona had been late, and it wasn't like her. She had fallen asleep while on duty, which was also a first. Chelsea dapped her fingers along the metal library racks as she walked toward her desk, indecisive and pensive. Jerome wanted to know if his mother was acting strange and showing her age, and yes, she was guilty of both. Once Chelsea's mother had descended deep into Alzheimer's, she was packed off to Happy Oaks, a place where the old woman's only companions were her bedsores. Leona wasn't delusional; she was just old. Did that warrant the call to Jerome?

Now sitting at her desk, Chelsea frowned with a memory. When she and Jerome were dating, Leona hovered over them, bringing them snacks and blankets when they were watching movies together. It was like Leona was terrified that he would leave her little nest, Jerome used to jokingly say. He also said that she was terrified of TVs, but that clearly wasn't true, as she had just bought one. She talked about television frequently, the hypocrite; it was a chief topic of conversation while reshelving books at the library. She was beginning to irritate even the other elderly volunteers. It wouldn't hurt to ask her to leave for her own good, Chelsea concluded firmly.

Chelsea grabbed at the phone on her desk. She dialed Jerome's number from memory and waited impatiently for the phone to ring on the other end. She stood up and prowled around the desk, stretching the corded phone line like a slinky. Finally, she heard his voice on the other end and felt her blood calm. Unfortunately, it was only his answering machine. She steeled herself to leave a message and waited for the beep.

In her chair at the center of the library, Leona's eyelashes fluttered like wings as she woke. She looked down at her body, perched sloppily on an armchair. Like little mushrooms at the roots of a tree, a collection of children was gathered in a semi-circle at her feet. She groggily wondered what they were doing. A number of them looked at her briefly before drawing pictures with crayons on scraps of paper. Others simply stared at her legs for some bizarre reason; a few even touched her timorously. Realization bathed her in its luke-warm light; she knew what the children were doing. They were staring at her legs, marbled with veins and fat, and feeling a combination of fascination and budding disgust at her. They couldn't get enough or look away from the awful sight.

She knew these children, knew their names and parents and favorite stories, and yet, here they were, impartially viewing her body as if she were already dead, just a relic for them to look at in amazement. She was like a museum piece for them, “The Oldest Woman in the World” with God as the artist. A scrawny one named Noah poked a bruise-colored vein on her knee and giggled when she gasped in pain.

They were not children anymore, she thought looking down on them despairingly. No, children were unsuspecting, harmless; these little beings were something else entirely. She had read “The Library Mouse” to *children* yesterday; these little *vultures* gazed at her legs with piercing judgment. She was old, and they knew it; they were just waiting for her to die.

Seeing that she was awake, the vultures snatched up their papers from the floor and dispersed. Their little bodies crouched and crawled, eying her for attack. She would need to control them, she realized with a start. They could spiral quickly out of control as children do. She planted her feet and rose to her full height, pleased to hear that the crack in her bones aroused muffled gasps from the audience. She seized a book from the multicolored table near her and opened it, cracking the spine for effect. Leona announced the title of the book, and, licking a quavering finger, she turned the first page and began to read.

Like with the smell of cookies, the children came closer. The girls left their crayon portraits and scampered together, sitting with crossed-legged civility in clusters near her. The boys, peaked with interest at the story, slithered on their fat bellies toward her, as though she were the Pied Piper or Christ. Leona puffed out her chest with pride; she had regained control of the mob for precious minutes.

Now she was safe, sitting in the familiar rocking chair. The children could not harm her, she had seen to that with the book. Children were not bad; they simply needed to be restrained was all. Now that she had enchanted them with *The Ugly Duckling*, they were sweet darlings again, waiting for her voice to impart the book's wisdom to them. They needed a firm hand to be good. They needed her, and they needed this library. Without it, what would they do? Leona smiled with pleasure, relishing every page that she read to these young ones who craved knowledge.

It was overwhelming, so many children dependent on this library for safety. Her children grew up here because they couldn't watch TV and didn't want to go home to their already-boring mother, she realized. Did children come here to be safe from violence as she had years before, or was that innocence gone from these children who watched those violent shows with accustomed eyes? How long could she mesmerize these children before they looked at her

like critical adults again? How long until she herself was like a book to them, cryptic and ancient like hieroglyphics?

It wasn't at all how she had pictured it, getting old, Leona thought miserably. She saw double, her hands pressing her wet eyes together. Shuddered sobs reverberated in her chest before spilling out. The children whispered and giggled in confusion; some prodded others to comfort the old grandma. Unaware of her audience, Leona began to rock the chair, mightily building momentum. Her feet lifted high off the ground, yet Leona kept furiously rocking. Her arcs grew wider as she grew more hysterical, more frenzied. She didn't know how much longer she had before she would be carted away like a broken television set, like a terrible, insane old bird who'd lost her last bit of sense. She pressed her back into the rocker's cushion as hard as she could and the chair catapulted her forward much too fast, throwing Leona to the ground violently and falling on top of her with a sickening crunch. When Mrs. Chelsea Bordeaux heard the shrieking of the little ones, she walked quickly toward the sound, expecting to see a fight over a picture book. She found Leona, whimpering and crying beneath the ruined rocker like a bird with a wounded wing alongside the highway, aware of her utter helplessness.