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Noisemaker

That's me, lurking by the elementary school wrought-iron fence, standing with my hands in the pockets of my peacoat. I'm half Chinese, half Caucasian, shoulder-length black hair, ovoid face, epicanthic eyes, soft nose, thick lips, still boyish, I like to think, at age thirty-seven. Behind me are the children, my daughters included, a rabbling swirl of high-pitched noise, shouts piercing other shouts, aural confetti, almost impossible to reproduce in a studio. Around me are my fellow parents. Dutiful. Concerned about the school. But don't underestimate them. They will draw and quarter you if you fuck with their kids. God help you if you happen to venture onto the playground at the wrong time. I did it once, trying to record that school-yard din for a project of mine. I walked right into the recess playground through the unlocked gate, wearing headphones, carrying an omni-directional microphone and a digital recorder. Teachers, attendants, and parent volunteers swarmed me—they came rappelling down walls, climbing from sewer grates, materializing in clouds of smoke—before I could get close to a child. The look in their vigilante eyes, their eagerness, it was almost like

they were hoping I was a pervert, some sicko, just so all their dark fears would be justified. They were angry with me when it turned out I was a parent and *not* a sexual predator. I was sternly warned not to return to the school unless I was accompanying my daughters.

Here's what's wrong with us: there's nothing at stake. That makes us oversensitive to minor transgressions, prone to disproportionate responses, quick to counterattack.

We are a prosperous community. Our lofts and apartments are worth millions. Our wives vestigially beautiful. Our renovations as vast and grand in scale as the construction of ships. We assure ourselves that our affluence does not define us. We are better than that. Measure us by the books on our shelves, the paintings on our walls, the songs in our iTunes playlists, our children in their secure little school. We live in smug certainty that our taste is impeccable, our politics correct, our sense of injustice at the current regime totally warranted.

We are cosseted, a warm little precinct, connected to the rest of the city, but for all our interaction, it feels as if there are drawbridges that keep out the would-be brigands and freebooters. They are among us on these sidewalks, but we don't notice them, the chubby minority girls in their sweatpants and string-strap day packs, the boys on their way to the community college with their heavy parkas and earphones, rapping as they strut. They are local color, harmless, we tell ourselves, as unlikely to cause havoc as the pizza-delivery man or the fellow from Guatemala who works at the deli.

So it is a shock when an icy hand reaches in and ruins a life. We wake up to the news and feel that a blade has scraped against our heart. We look at our children and wonder that they would be so exposed, but then, this sense of safety, this cordoned-off warmth, wasn't that always the aberration? An island of gentle deceit in a dark, hostile sea of truth, truth, truth?

I SEE MY FRIENDS across the street, fellow fathers in their late thirties, prosperous to different degrees, professionals of the arts. There is the sculptor, the playwright, the film producer, the photographer, all of them ostensibly artists but actually businessmen. They believe their awareness of their own hypocrisy keeps them from being hypocrites. I'm not an artist qua artist, as they are. But most days I join them and we make our way in twos and threes to a steak house recently taken to serving breakfast. We convene in a large round booth, ordering coffee, eggs, toast, Cream of Wheat. We spread

out newspapers and discuss films, television, political candidates, sports. You know what this bantering conversation is like; you have no doubt had many yourselves. We tell ourselves, as I'm sure you do, that our palaver is wittier, cleverer than most, unique somehow. We are artists, writers, professional hipsters of one sort or another, and so we must be funnier than you. But then we would think that, wouldn't we? Smug as we are, sure of our station. We are here, in this privileged canton, in this prosperous city, in this gilded era, so why shouldn't we be confident that our banter surpasses yours?

Yet this morning there is a schism, a rift, as an argument clouds the usual jocularity. A young girl, eleven years old, has been violated just a few blocks north of here, on a street banked with multimillion-dollar lofts. The men around this table are divided as to the threat, the appropriate level of fear, the correct response. Details are scant. She was letting herself into the building and was followed. That much is clear. Yet what happened after that is murky. The defiler joined her in the elevator, took her to the basement and then . . . what? Nobody is sure. The newspaper accounts make clear she was not sodomized or penetrated. Did he force himself into her mouth? Did he compel her to touch him? What, exactly, happened?

We are not sure.

Sumner, the film producer, is the most visibly concerned. He says that this is not the first time he has heard of young women being molested in the neighborhood. Why, there was the day last spring when Sumner himself was part of a group of concerned parents who chased a suspicious man with a camera from a local park.

Sumner, slightly older, graying around a shiny dome, bushy beard, handsome in an avuncular kind of way, looks around the table as if expecting huzzahs for his bravery at keeping the park free of sex offenders. He holds forth in his distinctive voice; it is throaty, almost hoarse-sounding. I have a good ear for voices and cadences, and Sumner has stretches during which he speaks in almost perfect 2/2 time. That rhythm makes it very hard to interrupt him.

"Within five hundred yards of where we are sitting right now," he says sternly, "there are five thousand registered sex offenders."

"Shut the fuck up, Sumner," the playwright says.

"What a big man you are, Sumner," I say, "keeping the neighborhood safe."

"You can laugh," Sumner says, "but this is a serious issue. A real issue."

"She probably knew the guy," I say. "Aren't most of these cases like that? The girl knew the guy?"

Sumner claims to know, for certain, that she didn't know him, that this was a stranger, an outsider who came into our community to molest—or worse!—a young girl.

I tell him he sounds hysterical. He tells me I have daughters, that I should be worried.

"Sumner," I tell him, "get over it. Not everybody wants to fuck your kids."

I AM A NOISEMAKER, known professionally as a sound engineer, providing the jiggle and wobble and chirp and boom that accompany so much of our popular entertainment. Every commercial, television show, and film requires a host of effects to provide verisimilitude: a door opens, a box of cereal is poured, a phone is hung up. Each makes a sound, but if you merely record the actual noise, it won't be satisfyingly authentic. So I must amplify, distort, manufacture, repeat, substitute. I own sound studios in which a filmed image can be projected and a few of us can sit behind mixers and computers to sync up the appropriate effects. I have boxes of different types of shoes, a wide range of sample floor surfaces—wood, stone, tile—a plywood board with two dozen locks and latches on it. I have gained some renown for my ability to discern and manipulate sound. I'm even asked on occasion to testify as an expert witness when prosecutors need to make an identification based on a voice-mail message or recorded conversation.

Of course, I didn't set out to become a noisemaker. I backed into it. I was a singer, a composer, a producer, a guitar player—I still have expensive electric guitars on stands in my studio; they glisten like museum pieces. I know many of my generation of punk rockers from California and New York who went on to some degree of fame in the music business. I produced minor albums by a few bands that never quite made it, but through that I learned how you make and control noise. The sound engineering began, in part, because I had the equipment. Friends asked me to help them on various projects; I found the work easy; they paid me well. I bought more equipment, purchased a floor in a vast old building, became, in effect, a kind of landlord to others who needed to work with noise. The renting of that studio space to filmmakers, sound engineers, and sound editors has turned out to be more lucrative than my own noisemaking and has resulted in my becoming successful in the small way that supports my family in this expensive city.

I also married well. Brooke is a tall, strapping, freckled blonde from a vast Connecticut family in which distant relatives turn to corpses at the rate of one

per year, leaving us generous amounts of shares, bonds, and cash.

All this has allowed me to maintain my bohemian style, my belief that I am somehow different than the bankers and attorneys who predominate in our community. I am still an artist, I tell myself, a creative person who happens to live among the bourgeoisie. This is not a small American achievement, I must tell you. The mongrel me, born in Hong Kong, raised in Monrovia, California, attending a state college in Northridge, joining with a prize American specimen like my wife. She could have picked anyone, yet she ended up with a half-breed. I have traveled miles, raised myself to this station, joined a better class than I was born into. And it was an effort, an act of will. I wanted to better myself and so I did. That is what those other fathers will never understand. I wasn't shown to my place. I had to scrap my way here, by making a go of this ridiculous sound-effects business, by marrying a rich, pretty woman. These were calculated decisions. These other gentlemen, they fell into it: private liberal arts colleges, internships, jobs at galleries, assisting more powerful men. For me, there was no easy path, and that is why I had no choice but to be ruthless.

That is why, in the days that follow, as our little community is consumed by fear of the sexual predator in our midst, I find myself hoping that this man, this savage, is not an interloper but a local, a member of our tribe gone horribly awry, so that these fathers will have to blame themselves rather than close ranks.

"Daddy," says my eight-year-old daughter, Cooper. "That looks like you!"

We are walking past the cozy lobby entrances, the doormen standing smartly behind their stations, the bulbous fish-eye cameras protruding from above doorbell buzzers. Mornings like this, our neighborhood seems like it is made up entirely of parents taking their children to school and men and women in suits marching up the pavement to their offices.

The A4-size pages are glued to lampposts, freebie newspaper boxes, worksite barricades. The staring face does look like me. He is supposed to be Caucasian, or so says the description beneath the black-and-white composite sketch, but he looks Hispanic, or, actually, as my daughter has pointed out, like me, Amerasian. With my hair tied back in a ponytail, as it is now, I could be him or he could be me.

"Is that you?" asks Penny, our six-year-old.

"No," I tell them, a little too loudly. I try again. "No. That's a man who did something wrong."

"What did he do?" asks Penny.

Cooper, who can read, has no doubt already made out: WANTED: SEX OFFENDER. The word *sex*, I assume, has tipped her that this is an adult matter. "It's about sex," she says.

"What's sex?" asks Penny.

"When a girl and a boy kiss," Cooper explains.

"Eeewww!" Penny says. "That's gross."

"But what did he do wrong?" Cooper asks.

"He, um, kissed someone he wasn't supposed to."

"Who?" she asks.

"A girl," I reply. We're standing at the corner, waiting for the light. The flyers are everywhere, tacked up around us, gazing back dumbly, their ubiquity a visual mantra of menace. He is everywhere, this predator. He could be lurking around every corner, right here, in front of the deli, or having coffee just inside the bakery windows. We must be vigilant, the posters insist—protective. "A young girl."

Cooper considers this. "But why are they looking for him?"

"Because kissing is bad," Penny explains.

"No, kissing is not bad." As I say this a mother and daughter walk past in the opposite direction, the women in a fur-collared coat, the bespectacled little girl in a wool and shearling parka that looks like it required institutional financing to secure. The mother overhears me, looks at me, considers for a moment where she has seen my face—the flyers are frickin' everywhere—and seems to be momentarily confused. I feel like shouting "I'm not him," but that would be awkward. I unfasten my hair so that it hangs loose.

I deposit my children in the yard, standing by Penny and holding her hand until her friends join her and she seems to forget about me. There are no flyers in the school yard, thank heaven, and in the busy throng of parents and bundled-up children, my resemblance to the suspect is unremarked.

IN THE RESTAURANT at breakfast, I find out it is Sumner who is behind the campaign to wrap the neighborhood in flyers. As a member of Community Board 1, a parent deeply involved in the local PTA, a big *macher* in the Friends of Grant Park Association, he ordered that the flyers be printed and he led the team of volunteers that spent six hours last night stapling and

pasting them throughout the neighborhood. It is urgent, he stresses, to be hypervigilant.

Sumner is between projects, temporarily supported by his wife, a gallery owner and truffler of young, expensive artists. She has been profiled in glossy magazines, and Sumner, distastefully in my opinion, always makes sure to bring in those issues and share them with us. His own credits, or what I can gather from Googling him and typing his name into IMDB, consist of a minor picture starring a major actor and a television movie, both over a decade old. He has too much time on his hands.

"Sumner," I tell him, "if the guy is supposed to be white—"

The playwright cuts me off, smiling, "Then how come he looks like you?"

"Well," I say, "yeah."

Sumner says the police gave him that sketch, and in the photocopying the image darkened. "What do you care?"

"It's just that, if you're looking for a white guy, why have a picture where the guy clearly doesn't look white?"

Sumner waves his hands and shakes his head. "We are doing whatever we have to do, as a community."

"I'm imagining guys with pitchforks and torches marching up and down Hudson Street," says the playwright.

"If that's what it takes," Sumner says.

Later, I am over at one of my studios going through the bookings with the manager when I look up and see two men in bubble parkas smiling at me through the sliding glass window. They are doing the post-production on a pilot for a hip-hop *American Idol* kind of show in Studio C, which now smells strongly of marijuana smoke.

"Yo, it's fuckin' Chester the molester." They are holding the flyer up and turning their eyes from the image to me.

I shake my head, smiling. "Read the fine print. It says 'Caucasian,' OK?"

They squint. "This shit's almost too small to read, but, yo, it don't say nothing about Caucasian."

They saunter down the hall, laughing.

I decide to head home. On my way back to the loft, I stop at a construction site where about three dozen of the flyers have been pasted. I notice that the line about the perpetrator's race has vanished. Now, beneath the bold WANTED: SEX OFFENDER, it only describes the whereabouts and time of the

alleged attack. Below that is the sketch that might as well be of me.

I tell myself that no one is going to assume that I am the sex offender. Why would they? We've been living here since before Cooper was born. We are pillars of the community. I should just ignore it.

But I can't. When I go to the bank, the FedEx office, the coffee shop, I feel like I am the subject of intense scrutiny. Everyone who lives or works in the neighborhood must have seen the flyer, and there are more of them appearing every day, Sumner and his minions apparently having nothing to do but continue their campaign. The local freebie newspaper has even run a story about the effort to keep our community safe from sexual predators. The community board, according to the article, is considering hiring a guard for the local playground, additional security at the school. The tone of the article is of barely contained hysteria: quotes from mothers about spotting suspicious characters lurking near the school, a secondhand account of the man who had to be chased from the park last year—no mention of whether he was actually dangerous or not—and even a story about someone attempting an unauthorized recording at our elementary school. The description is so sinister that I read the entire paragraph before realizing they are talking about me.

Then, that evening, while I'm looking through my daughters' homework folders from school, I find they have a sheaf of the flyers in the pocket where there is usually a list of homework assignments.

"Why do you guys have these?" I ask Cooper, who is sitting at the computer in her room, playing a game with one of her virtual pets.

Penny sits in a seat beside her, watching.

"We're supposed to take them home."

"For what?"

"I don't know," Cooper says. "To give to people?"

When I ask who told them to do this, they explain that there was an assembly at school and a woman from the police department came and told them to report any suspicious-looking men and handed out these flyers.

"Why do you have so many?"

"I took a lot because they look like you," Cooper explains.

"We're gonna draw on them," Penny adds.

I say that they shouldn't have them and that I am throwing them away. The suddenly angry tone of my voice shocks them and Penny starts crying, running into the dining room where Brooke is flipping through a Pottery Barn catalog. I can hear Penny sobbing, "Daddy spoke to me in a mean voice."

As she consoles our daughter, Brooke looks at me sternly.

"What's wrong with you?" she asks me later.

I show her the flyer, not bothering to point out the similarity.

"Who cares?"

"How would you feel if everywhere you went there was a picture of you beneath the words 'sex offender'?"

"But it's not you," she says.

"It looks like me. Even the kids thought it was me."

Last year, when she found out about my walking into the yard with the microphone and headphones, she was furious, asking me what the hell I had been thinking. Actually, I hadn't been thinking. There was a crowd scene at a park in a television show I was working on and I thought I could grab the sounds in the playground. Brooke told me at the time that I had embarrassed her, but I never really understood what the big deal was.

Now, unspoken in our conversation, I can sense her belief that I am guilty—not of the crime committed against the young girl, but of naive stupidity.

"If you didn't do anything," she says, "then why would you care?"

I don't want to answer her. "I don't know, it's embarrassing."

"Are you hiding something?" she asks, half joking, her eyebrows arched.

"Of course not."

I try to think back on where I was the night in question. I have no idea. But why am I trying to come up with an alibi? In case I need it, I suppose, in case the uncanny resemblance between the perpetrator and myself leads to my being officially accused.

The next morning outside the school, after drop-off, I tap Sumner on the shoulder. He stands with a group of mothers bundled up in their parkas and wool coats. Sumner is the type who flirts shamelessly with other mothers. I find them all disappointing, lusterless. Some of them are pretty in their depleted way, but all of them have a haggard, aged quality that I don't find exciting.

"Why doesn't the flyer say the guy is white?" I ask.

"What are you talking about?"

"The flyer, of the sex offender," I explain. "It doesn't mention his race anymore."

Sumner shrugs. "It got too blurry from all the copying so we whited it out."

"But then how does anyone know who they're looking for?"

"What? It's a guy who—who looks like that. It's not confusing." Sumner

shakes his head. The women behind him are all watching our conversation. Sumner's metronomic 2/2 cadence is clearly audible all around us. "Why are you always questioning this project?"

"Because it seems a little bit hysterical."

"This is very real," Sumner says. "You have to look at your own motives here."

"What are you talking about?"

"There was the incident last year, with the microphone."

The women behind him all nod.

"Are you accusing me of something?" I ask.

"No, I'm just saying, there is the resemblance, so…" Sumner stops.

"Where were you that night?" a brunette with a short, puggish nose behind him suddenly asks. I know who she is. She is married to a guitar player in an important though not commercially successful group.

I walk away.

THE COMMUNITY HAS turned against me. I was an imposter all along, they seem to have realized, ersatz, and my counterfeit composition has now been deduced. I am a fraud. A half-breed passing in this privileged sanctum for wealthy bohemians, artists, and artist manques. I never really belonged, and this was their way of rooting me out. Do we all feel like we are on borrowed time? That sooner or later the truth about our base nature will be revealed and we will be shown as who we are?

I begin to run through the possibilities. What if I am arrested? What if I am found guilty? Imprisoned? We've all heard the stories: they castrate sexual offenders in prison, sodomize them, torture them, the guards condone it, or so we have been led to believe. Is that to be my punishment?

I am not surprised when the police arrive. They are detectives, dressed in warm-looking parkas, wearing jeans and sneakers. The taller of the two of them nods and looks around my office. "First Precinct," he says.

I am suddenly acutely aware of my environs. I use this space mainly for storage. There are file cabinets behind me, an antique wooden desk in front of me, and a television next to the door. Boxes containing noise-creating artifacts are labeled and stacked along the wall beside me—SCRAPING; BANGING; RIPPING & TEARING; LEAKING & BLEEDING. There are piles of children's shoes in an opened box beside the desk labeled CHILD & BABY STEPS. A few dozen gloves of varying sizes are piled up on a table next to me, where I have been trying them on and removing them, listening for any variation. I

slide off a long, slender, up-to-the-elbow white leather woman's glove and set it down on the desk.

"Yes?"

I had been expecting men in uniform or perhaps suits and ties, like agents on television. These two gentlemen, both Hispanic, mid-thirties, don't look like cops as much as guys who might work at the deli. They don't show me any badges. They ask me my name, if this is my studio, if I am a sound engineer. I answer affirmatively.

I want to tell them that I have an alibi. I am almost sure I was here at the studio that night, working late. I've looked at the logs to see who was renting space that evening and have their phone numbers ready. They will remember that I was working on a series for the Military Channel. They will have seen me in Studio B. Or in the hallway. Or perhaps here, digging through the props. I can prove my innocence.

The detectives are impressively stolid and patient. They are not in a hurry.

"We have something for you," the taller agent says.

I am wondering if I should accept anything from them without an attorney's advice.

"We have a job for you," his partner says.

Is this how they arrest people? By toying with them? I don't understand.

"Is that a euphemism?" I ask.

"A what?" the taller agent says. "No, it's a tape. Or whatever you call these things."

He hands me a flash memory device.

In the midst of her struggle in that basement, as she was being groped and wrestled, the violated girl accidentally made a phone call to a stranger. That call had gone into a stranger's voice mail and it took a few days for this woman to figure out that this was evidence of a crime.

"Some Mormon in Utah listens to this and we're lucky she doesn't think it's an obscene phone call."

His partner cuts him off. "Heavy breathing, panting, some guy talking dirty."

They want me to work with the file, to bring up the voice and tamp down the rest of the sound, to isolate those frequencies in which you can hear the man's voice so that they might more easily identify the perpetrator.

"Isn't that what you do," the tall gent asks, "work with sound?"

I shrug. "I can try."

I SIT DOWN IN Studio B and slide on a pair of headphones. The recording is awash with white noise, hisses, a banging sound like a radiator clanging. There is the soft hum of an elevator motor. The mechanical clunk of an elevator door sliding open. They must be near the elevator. They are in a basement. Every sound is exaggerated and faintly doubled by the echo. I can clearly make out a man's voice, urging, insistent, surprisingly angry. The girl is sobbing. It's an awful scene and I am able to project myself there all too easily. I can visualize the location. The girl is pushed against the wall. The man is facing her, his voice more clear and cutting because the sound waves are bouncing off the concrete into her phone mouthpiece. I know how to reduce the levels of extraneous noise. The man's voice is a lower mid-register, clear when it emerges from its throaty beginning. I am stripping away the bass and treble, reducing the hiss, finding and eliminating those parts of the file containing the radiator clangs. I keep removing and excising and soon all I am left with is the man's voice.

No one ever comes to retrieve the file.

When I call the precinct a few weeks later, I am given a case number and passed along to a detective's voice mail. He doesn't call back. I finally e-mail an mp3 to one of the detectives who visited me.

The posters have been replaced by other, less insistent notices, a flyer for a new release by a rock band, a missing dog, Cirque du Soleil is coming back to town.

It is warmer now. The children walking to school must skirt between al fresco tables and the curb; the boys in aprons hosing down the sidewalks direct their spray away from them when they pass. After school, the parks are crowded, the nannies on benches, the less dutiful among them talking on cell phones in their native patois. I like to take my daughters there, and if I have a free afternoon, I pick them up at school and walk them over, past the ice-cream truck where the long line is no deterrent. They ask for bright red or purple confections with names like Twoball Screwball or VeryBerryBlast that taste like frozen, crushed-up Lifesavers and have gumballs or jawbreakers at the bottom. We bring our ice-cream novelties to the park and find a spot among the nannies. Penny and Cooper seldom finish their treats; they dig out their gumballs and leave me to dispose of soggy cardboard cups turned garish red.

I have stopped joining the other fathers for coffee in the morning. And when I see Sumner now, standing by the swing with his daughters, I don't acknowledge him. He sees me and walks over, smiling, as if unaware of any

possible change in our relationship.

He tells me he's been producing a reality show for a pay-cable station and has just returned from shooting in Vancouver.

I tell him I've been busy too.

I ask what happened to the molester. Did they ever find him? Do they have any leads?

He shrugs, uninterested, and trots after his daughter, who is shouting for him. He says he's forgotten the whole affair. I can't.