

Burning Tapes

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Henry adjusted his headphones uncomfortably. As the minutes dragged on, he began to feel increasingly self-conscious. Every time another passenger happened to glance in his direction, a swarm of questions crowded his mind. Why were they staring? Did he somehow look suspicious? What right did they have to stare at him like that? His fingers tightened around his music player. Click to pause. He felt if he let out his excitement and apprehension, they would fill up the whole bus and spill out. However, he did not want to attract any attention, so he did his best to stay quiet and sit still, repressing his urge to check the time every few minutes. Click to play. The reason for his nervousness was, Henry had a secret. It was not the kind of guilty secret that wears its bearer down with shame or grief. No. It was the kind that singles out those who know it and makes them feel proud and privileged. He was part of something, something they would not understand even if he showed them. Click replay. Henry listened carefully to the recorded segment once again. It began with the warm crackling sound of breathing barely distinguishable from the soft white noise of a low-fi microphone wrapping itself around his ears. Then came the voice, both firm and tender, dragging its l's and r's, playfully winding its vowels around its tongue and holding back each syllable with relish. "Good evening to you, yes, you. Our listener. We hope you will be joining us for this session and eagerly expect your presence." These few words alone were enough to send shivers running down Henry's spine. Click to stop.

In an attempt to soothe himself he glanced outside the bus window. The wide open spaces with harmless trees, peaceful benches and decorative fountains had gradually given way to sinuous alleyways, squalid century-old buildings and small uninviting shops with dusty signs and stained windows. He was not at all familiar with this neighborhood. For a moment he thought of heading back home. The daylight was fading and he feared he might lose his way and never reach his destination. But his curiosity was stronger than his misgivings. By the time his mental debate was over, the bus had reached his stop and he had no choice but to get off. Making his way deeper and deeper into the cobweb of streets, he did not need to listen to the rest of the recording to know which direction to follow, which turn to take. According to his music player, he had listened to it eleven times already. Yet anguish had somehow made its way into his heart. It was the anguish of someone surrounded by the unknown, someone who feels compelled to head further into unexplored territory. By the time he had reached the door, the trepidation which had left him breathless a few minutes earlier had faded entirely.

A week later, as he listened to the sound of the burning building he had left behind, he

wondered how it had come to this. Where had it started? He thought back to how he had met Elizabeth. There was a stage, a microphone, a song, a voice that soared above all else and carried him away, away from his friends, away from the chair he was sitting in. A deep mysterious voice, cleaving through the friendly chatter, folding over itself and hiding in its own shadow like the fabric of her dress which rippled as she sang. He went to find her after the show and invited her to dinner. She was new in town so she gratefully accepted. On that first evening shared with her he wondered at the beauty of her voice, which seemed to eclipse their surroundings regardless of what she was saying. She was in turn drawn by the rapture in his eyes. Knowing they would probably never see each other again, they spoke candidly, enjoying what they thought was but a fleeting night of infatuation. The next morning, she left him with the half-hearted promise of a “see you soon.” Henry did not expect her to fulfill it, and she probably wouldn't have, were it not for the technical difficulties of the weather that day, that prevented her plane from taking off. She called him and they spent the rest of the day together. Now, under the very real light of the sun, they felt more like friends than passionate strangers. This would be the first of a series of rendez-vous they were to have. Eventually, she decided it would be more convenient for her to move in with him. Henry remembered now, how happy he was back then, how blissful the following year had been, how, after much mutual exploration, a complicity had settled in between them, how the cement of time had solidified their feelings and deepened their bonds. They started recording romantic messages for each other before they parted, when she left for a tour across the country. Every morning, before work, he would put on his headphones, press the button on his music player and listen to Elizabeth whisper sweetly in his ear. She would always begin with : “Did you think I was gone? Well here I am, in your ear. My voice is with you, wherever I might be.” And those few words alone would bring to mind a thousand moments spent together. There was the first time they drank tea together. Lizzy loved tea. She drank some before every show, to reassure herself and clear her throat. He remembered how, when she had moved in, she had brought with her a selection of her favorite blends - a selection which, to Henry's astonishment, was enough to fill a whole shelf in the living room. There was the time, before they had started living together, when he had awoken to joyful shouts of “Henry, Henry! Happy birthday, Henry!” coming from his open window, and seen her there looking up at him with a large potted cactus in her arms – a running joke they had. And there was also that show she had been so worried about. He had spent the eve holding her in his arms and stopping her from biting her fingernails.

In the evening, he would select some older messages and listen to each of them carefully, for something he might have missed, as if hoping to squeeze some more feeling out of them. While she was with him, he took great care in composing poems he would then record for her to listen in between shows. She would try to sneak up on him to see what he was writing, and he would shy away, closing his notebook at once. It became a ritual, an integral part of their relationship. It brought them closer together for all the distance that separated them. At the time, listening to those recordings was an innocent act of love. However, that changed suddenly one morning when his bus was stopped by a car crash that blocked the road ahead. As he stepped onto the pavement, he heard a man, an angry man, furiously pouring insults and threats onto a fearful woman, who, according to him, had pulled the break without warning and caused the accident. Henry joined the crowd of spectators and tried to catch a glimpse of the scene. He was startled to find a tinge of anxiety in the man's voice. He felt there was something outstanding about that outraged voice, something that he had never found in an outcry like that before, something both repulsive and fascinating. Maybe it was his blatant dishonesty or his contempt which transpired in the way he crushingly reduced his victim into nothing more than an illustration of the female sex's inferior driving skills, maybe it was the shadow of a sob, the quiver of his tone, a symptom of the helplessness that must have filled his heart. Like a child throwing a tantrum, thought Henry. He could not pin it down, and felt compelled by curiosity to encapsulate this rant, to preserve it somehow. He groped wildly for his recorder but before he realized he had left it at home, the anger of the moment had subsided, drowned by the sound of an approaching police siren. The spell was broken. As he became aware of what it was he was trying to do, his cheeks flushed red with shame. What was his intention? The recorder had been a gift, meant for his voice and his only, for her ears and hers only. But he quickly waved these concerns aside as childishly coy. Yet, now that Henry recalled the pivotal events that had led him on the path to his present situation, this one clearly stood out as the most striking. The initial erosion of the walls of intimacy, within which he had restricted his recordings until then. The breach, the minute crack that would bring down the dam. The following days, he kept thinking back to that episode. He still felt the gist of what had attracted him but he could not remember the details of the scene. The words escaped him, like water through cupped hands. He yearned for a way to preserve them and resolved to keep his recorder with him at all times.

Then came the seething pianist. He tried his best to conjure up the fast breathing, the sound of the keys – loud, awkward. It had happened two weeks after the accident. He was standing in the hall

outside his flat, rummaging in his pockets when he heard a trickle of notes, flowing promisingly from a nearby door. It was a light, fluttering melody, and was just about to carry him away when it came to an abrupt stop: a note twanged out of harmony and sent the following ones cascading into dissonance. Silence, then an exasperated huff. He pulled out his recorder, expectant. Again, the melody started. This time, it was faster, still beautiful, but the impatience of the pianist was tangible. Again, after a few seconds, the fingers tripped over each other and broke the flow. There was a pause. He heard a woman, grumbling. Click record. "Come on!" Her words were clearly audible through the closed door, harsh and impatient. "This is s'posed to be the easy part." She tried again. Now the music sounded slow and deliberate. The notes lay themselves out easily, one after the other, and Henry sensed, as she progressed, she was regaining confidence. But now, once more, she made a mistake. Henry smiled to himself. He heard a loud, flat noise and imagined her slamming the piano shut, infuriated. She was seething, and in her seething he heard not only the frustration of the pianist but some of the same helplessness he had felt in the man's angry rumble. She let out a cry of frustration. Henry felt her anguish fill his ears, wash over him and engulf him. It was at that moment of extreme relish, Henry recalled, a scrap of paper had fallen from his pocket, pulling him away from the piano, out of the room, through the keyhole and back to the hall where he had been standing, with the recorder in his hands. He was supposed to make dinner for Elizabeth tonight. Click to stop. Suddenly he felt embarrassed. And this time, he could not dismiss the feeling so easily. He took a few steps back. The strangeness of what he was doing hit him. He felt afraid of himself and, longing for reassurance, opened his door to find Lizzy.

The following weeks he often thought back to that episode. He felt he had been on the verge of hearing some sort of confession. He dared not listen to the recording lest Elizabeth ask any questions. He considered telling her about it but realized how ridiculous he would sound. Whether he liked it or not, he had a secret, a secret that held his attention, that dampened the sounds and dimmed the lights around him ever so slightly. This was the first secret between them and, although he did his best to convince himself it was a harmless piece of information, it distanced him from her and weighed him down with guilt. At times, he spoke to her with abrupt defensiveness, imagining she might be insinuating something. Later, in an attempt to make up for his unjustified harshness, he would try to be kinder, warmer towards her. The lack of subtlety in the pattern was obvious to him now. Had she noticed any change in his behavior? He felt certain of it. She was very observant and caring. He remembered how, after a couple of dates only, she seemed to know more about him than he ever had.

How every slight change in his mood was a source of questioning. However she had never brought it up. Henry realized now how oblivious to her he had been in his urge to protect his secret. This was probably the reason he didn't suspect anything until it was too late. When the much anticipated moment of her next departure arrived, he had to make an effort to hide his smile of anticipation. She would be going to America on a rather long trip. She would go on a tour and record an album with a famous musician – he could never remember his name. She had asked him to accompany her, and, after avoiding the subject as long as he thought it acceptable he had reluctantly declined. “I don't have enough money to pay for the trip. Besides, I can't just leave my job. You'll be fine without me. It's not that I don't want to go, it's just... .” The weak and incomplete excuses spilled out, failing to compensate each other's deficiencies. He knew this was a great disappointment to her, although she did not show it immediately. Thankfully, the sting of guilt had subsided the next morning, overcome by the prospect of finally having the apartment to himself. As he listened to the voice of the pianist, eyes closed, he lived the scene once more, the feeling of satisfaction in intruding on the privacy of a stranger, the rush of excitement brought by the feeling of transgression. He reveled in her frustration. He was almost as surprised as the first time when the recording was cut short mid sob. Click replay.

He listened to the recording over and over until it lost all its meaning, and even then, he craved for more. He spent days hoping in vain to overhear someone else, someone who would let their emotions out thinking they were alone. His hope led him to linger in areas where he thought he had a better chance of finding what he was looking for, and when it proved insufficient he started going places purposefully to seek out a new fragment. He attended funerals to witness attempts at dignified stoicism collapse into uncontrolled sobs, hid in nightclub bathroom stalls to listen to crazed hipsters panting and sobbing, went to weddings uninvited, to listen to awkward, hypocritical congratulations from distant relatives, snuck into hospital clinics to listen to doctors announce dismal diagnoses. His evenings were spent selecting, cropping, saving and classifying the recorded segments and replaying his favorite ones over and over. Most events were, all in all, disappointingly ordinary. Henry had been hoping for thunderous speeches and dramatic outcries, but he found that most people, in such moments of extreme emotion, hid behind blankets of either polite clichés, timidity, or indifference. Fortunately, now and then, he would come upon a particularly eloquent claim for revenge by an orphaned son or an exquisitely scornful comment, muttered in a corner at a dinner party. He would then dutifully save it for later listening. A good segment would keep him going for a couple days. So absorbed was he by this occupation, that he often forgot to eat or sleep. His complexion suffered from such strain. He grew

thinner and thinner. His eyes were ringed with blueish skin, which intensified the haggard look he cast at his surroundings whenever he went out into the open. His only regular source of nourishment was coffee. On his tongue he would feel its bitterness, and in his ears, the bitter words of strangers. The smell clung to him. It was in his breath, in the dark stains on his clothes, in the mugs he left around the apartment. Dust piled up, grime gathered, even the cactus dried out, but none of it mattered to him. When Elizabeth returned two months later, she was astonished and indignant. “What happened to you? You never answered my calls, and now I come home and find you've been starving yourself! Are you sick? And what have you done to our apartment?” Henry stared at her blankly from his chair, which he had not left upon her arrival. All he could think of was that his mouth was dry and that his mug of cold coffee was almost empty. Click to stop.

He glanced again at the column of smoke, rising above the surrounding buildings like an ink stain in the bright blue sky. The police would probably be coming for him soon. They would take him, they would lock him up in a gray cell and leave him there for a few years, maybe for the rest of his life. What a pointless exercise. As if he still had anything left in him worth keeping. He had burned everything he owned. Every little thing he owned was up there, in that roiling haze, rising up into the heavens. Lizzy was gone as well. It was amazing how you could upturn your whole life with just a box of matches. There was no reason for staying any longer, he should probably leave. How? He felt lighter than ever, as if he were floating higher and higher above his feet, like the dark cloud overhead. The question of how he would kill himself seemed to taunt him. It brought him back to the soles of his shoes, to his sweaty shirt and itchy sweater. He did not have any money. He thought of throwing himself under a car but the nearby streets were deserted. After some deliberation he decided he would walk to the bridge down south, tie his feet together with his clothes and jump. Yes, that would do it. He knew it was very high, so he would probably die of a heart attack before he even hit the water surface. But what he liked most about the idea was, the bridge was where he had taken Elizabeth when he had seen her for the second time. He thought back to the hesitant figure, with long dark hair he had seen through the key hole before letting her into his apartment. As he opened the door and realized who it was, his lips formed a smile which did not leave his face for the remainder of her stay. They decided to brave the summer haze that rose from the pavement itself and summoned droplets of sweat onto their faces. The burning tar had banished most citizens back to their air-conditioned living rooms but the heat wave that rose from their feet, up their knees and into their bellies only intensified the sultry

softness of each other's embrace. As he made his way along the numerous streets and avenues leading to his destination, he let his mind wander, remembering the orange summer dress she had worn that day and the innocence of it all, pondering the symbolism that would surround his death with the satisfaction of a writer imagining a striking finale to his story. It did not matter that she would never hear about it. His only audience was himself, and it was enough.

When Elizabeth slammed the apartment door on her way out, he snapped back to his senses. All at once, he saw the cups strewn across the floor, he smelled the stench that filled the room, he felt the pain wringing through his head, the dryness of his tired eyes. He heard her screams and sobs echoing in his ears. This was the last straw. She'd been way too patient with him until then. Anyway, she had someone else now. And Henry wasn't even fucking trying to justify himself. Clearly he didn't care about her at all. Couldn't he see how pathetic he looked?

It was as if someone had opened a cellar door and let the light in. The soot that clogged the air was there for him to see. He stood up suddenly and looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. What had happened to him? She was gone now and all he had left was this junk, these recordings, this coffee and the freedom to live his obsession. But it could never compensate for his loss. He screamed at the empty mugs on the floor. He screamed at the headphones on his desk. He screamed at the mirror on the wall. Suddenly all went black. He collapsed onto the floor. When he woke up again, he laid where he was, motionless. There was no point in moving, Elizabeth was gone. He stayed there, thinking. Only when he had some idea of what to do next, did he dare move an inch. If he stopped himself from feeling anything, he could block out the pain. It was under this resolution that he managed to stand up and, mechanically, pick up the strewn cups, spoons, dirty clothes, wash what needed to be washed, throw away what couldn't, shave, and take a long ice-cold shower. When he was done he realized how hungry he felt, so he put on a clean change of clothes, went to the supermarket, bought some food, cooked himself a proper meal, ate it without relish, and no more satisfaction than that of having managed to pull himself through all this. He washed the dishes, and looked around for something to do. The room was empty, save for his desk, where the headphones lay, invitingly. His eyes lingered on the instrument for a second before he tore his gaze away and marched out, resolutely. He walked and walked, from place to place. Let's go to the park, yes. Now, let's go to that tall building over there, next to the bank. Now, let's follow the edge of the water for a while. Anything to rid his mind of the tantalizing lust for voices that had done so much damage to his life already. When the sun

started to set, he headed back to the apartment. He would come home and to bed immediately. As he entered the building, he noticed his mailbox was full of unopened envelopes and took them with him. He opened the door, left them on the living room table and went to bed. He lost consciousness the very second his head touched the pillow. It was an opaque night of sleep. He had been so violently wrung, almost to the point of becoming unstuck from his own self, that he had no strength left for dreams or memories. The next morning, he woke up, and with grim efficiency, went through the motions of a routine preparation for the day. He started opening the envelopes. There were mostly ads but also two letters from the owner of the apartment, asking for his rent, he would call him as soon as he was done opening his mail. There was one more envelope, that contained only a cassette tape. Intrigued, he turned on his music player and listened intently : “Good evening to you, yes, you. Our listener. We hope you will be joining us for this session and eagerly expect your presence. You may not have heard of us, but we know all there is to know about you, at least all there is worth knowing. Your uncommon taste for the despair of strangers has come to our attention and we would like you to share your findings with us. If you wish to do so, you can find us behind the door down Keer dead end, near Dali Avenue.”

Making his way deeper and deeper into the cobweb of streets, he did not need to listen to the rest of the recording to know which direction to follow, which turn to take. Yet anguish had somehow made its way into his heart. It was the anguish of someone surrounded by the unknown, someone who feels compelled to head further into unexplored territory. By the time he had reached the door, the trepidation which had left him breathless a few minutes earlier had faded entirely. It was a wooden door, with a window covered with iron arabesques. There was no doorbell and when he tried knocking he found it was open. Behind it, was an empty hallway leading to a flight of stairs. Henry was surprised, he had expected someone to welcome him. He called out, and when he heard no answer other than the echo of his words, stepped inside. At the base of the stairwell was a boarded up door and the stone steps spiraled above him into the darkness. The end of the corridor was out of reach of the dusty street lights. He looked for a switch and only found one after heading back to the entrance. Gazing at the street outside from the threshold, he felt like a mariner, at the foot of a boarding ramp moments before setting sail. He was leaving firm ground for a world of more uncertain footing. He flicked the switch and, slowly, the weak blueish light of the ceiling neons made its way to the end of the corridor and up the stairs. Henry followed the eerie glow, his footfalls resonating in the silence. The doors he found were closed and the various amounts of rust and grime indicated they had not been

opened in years. The handrails and wall linings cast clear cut shadows criss-crossing into oneiric stains on the stone tiling, that danced before his eyes and lulled him into a daze. After what seemed like an eternity he was startled to hear the sound of chatter from above. He quickened his pace and soon came upon the entrance to a large, warmly lit ball room full of people, sitting around circular tables.

When Henry reached the bridge, he summoned up the last memory he had recorded. The absence of his headphones did not diminish the intensity of his vision. This segment, the most exquisite, and the most painful of all was carved deep into his mind and he saw no chance of it ever fading. Click to play. Crackling flames, a shriek of surprise. The rattle of the locked door. The scream of pain - the handle must have been burning hot. The smell of burning hair. Click to stop.

“Glad you could join us,” said a woman sitting at the table nearest from the entrance, and Henry recognized her voice from the recording. “Come here, did you bring us your tapes?”. She led him to the corner of the room where a cassette player and a microphone sat on a table from which spread dozens of sinuous black cables that seemed to disappear behind curtains, armchairs, tables and chandeliers. He handed her what he had brought and she accepted it with a satisfied smile. “Thank you, now go sit down, we will listen to these later tonight.” Henry, by now thoroughly bewildered, did not resist her authoritative tone and slumped down limply into an empty armchair. A tall, skeletal, half bald man wearing a purple suit, with salient eyebrows and a severe clearcut nose that contrasted with his impish chuckle, and a skinny, short-haired girl with small fiery eyes, looking at him with a mixture of indignation and curiosity, were sitting close by. “Hi there, uh, Henry, right? I'm John, and that pouting young miss, that's Kim.” Kim, shot Henry a glance just long enough to acknowledge his presence, then turned her steely stare back to John. “So, tell us Henry, how do you get all those tapes? I mean, do you just record everything you hear and wait till you get lucky, like missy here, or do you actually go out there and make it happen?” Henry mumbled a response but before he could finish John interrupted him. “Man, you guys are boring! You must waste so much time. Funerals? What a drag. See, I'm a musician, I play the saxophone, and what I do is, during my shows, I get people to come up on stage and say something for the audience on the mic. I make a big deal out of it, you know, work it up. Then, right before they start talking, I crack a joke about their dorky pants or something, and just like that, they start pouring out. Doesn't work all the time, of course. If I'm looking for something a little stronger, I can just sprinkle some coke in a girl's drink at an after party. Man, I just love it when they start freaking

out!” At that point, Kim interrupted him. “Stop blabbering for a moment John. Can you believe this guy? No morals, just cynicism. All he wants is to have fun. Those are people, you know? You're hurting them, humiliating them, just so you can enjoy your little tapes. Besides, the whole point is that it should be spontaneous. I don't sneak into weddings either, sorry Henry, but I think that's crazy. It should be something that happens around you. Like snow, you know, you don't go around making snow, you just wait for it to fall, and eventually, it does. And it's beautiful. Of course, you'll find people with all kinds of taste around here.” Suddenly, the lights dimmed down, and the room fell silent.

“Tonight we are about to listen to a selection of recordings by Henry, who is sitting among us for the first time.” It was the woman who had greeted him again. Her voice seemed to emanate from all directions at once. As she paused, her words clung to the air around Henry, who sank even deeper into his chair in self-consciousness. The first notes of the piano melody trickled into the room and he felt, once more, the rushing excitement. He saw the door, the recorder in his trembling hands, all in sharper detail than ever before. When the segment was over, he noticed the tension that filled the room. Hands were clasped, smiles twitched, bloodshot eyes stared into space, pupils dilated. John let out a loud guffaw. Seeing his passion shared by so many strangers comforted him. Maybe he was better off without her after all. While the following segments went by, this thought strengthened, as each was met with satisfied smiles from the audience. And by the end of the session, he felt reconciled with his voyeuristic interests. “And that, ladies and gentlemen, was brought to us by Henry.” The lights turned back on and the room was filled with applause. Kim gave him a smile of recognition. “Come here Henry, yes, up here with me, so everyone can see you.” She was standing on an empty drape covered table. A makeshift stage. Beaming, Henry stood up, and marched proudly across the room, followed by dozens of gazes. He climbed on the table and she motioned him to stand next to her. “Now, let's listen to something a little different. This is a project, coming to us from our one and only, John. Something he's put a lot of efforts into. Please, listen carefully, and enjoy.” She handed Henry the microphone, stepped off the table and went to sit with the crowd a few tables away.

Had he really done it? Upon his return to Dali avenue, he had found the red door was sealed, and a police officer had told him the building had been vacated years ago because the derelict stairway was a threat to the safety of its residents. He kept replaying that night, scene by scene, in his head. But the only thing he had left was the cassette, the obsessively magnetic invitation. In his mind's eye, the details of that night were amplified into nightmarish visions that confused him. How much of what he

remembered was real? Since then he had felt his grip on reality was faltering. Had he really done it?

This time, all the lights went off, and a spotlight fell on the table where he was standing. The few people he could see were looking up at him, expectantly. What was he supposed to do? He hadn't prepared anything to say. Then, the first segment started. "Did you think I was gone? Well here I am, in your ear. My voice is with you, wherever I might be." He turned pale. This was his favorite message from Elizabeth. Henry felt a stab of embarrassment. This was one of his most intimate possessions. How had John found it?

"H-how?"

No answer.

"H-how?"

"It's not that I don't want to go, it's just... ."

"Stop! Stop it!"

He started shaking violently. To his horror, the people sitting close by only smiled in satisfaction and stared deeper into his eyes.

"You never answered my calls, and now I come home and find you've been starving yourself!"

"You don't understand. It wasn't my fault! Please! Stop!"

And then came his screams of regret. And he answered those screams with sobs. And his sobs were answered by cackles from the audience. And when the laughter subsided, one last fragment was heard.

"John, John, it's me. Pick up. John, I need a place to stay the night. It's Henry. I don't know what's happened to him. He's different. He's strange. He- he scares me. "