

## OF SOUND MIND

*Snap!*

Paige's entire body jolted in her seat as she whipped her head around to glare at the offending person.

*Snap! Pop!*

The noises bounced around and around in her head, echoing off each other, unending. They wouldn't go away. She covered her ears with her hands. The exam hadn't even started yet and already, she was in Hell.

*Smack!*

It wasn't like she could just keep her fingers stuffed in her ears for the next two hours, and she didn't have any gum of her own to make the sound more bearable through mimicry or drowning it out. She looked behind her in desperation, trying to see if there were any other open seats, but of course there weren't. She had gotten there late today, something she always tried to avoid for exactly this reason.

The person next to her wiped his nose and let out a loud snorting snuffle. Paige flinched and edged away from him, though that brought her nearer to the one chewing gum. She could hear every smack, every movement of the cursed gum in the girl's mouth. What was the matter with her? Was she raised in a barn? She must have been. How else could she justify the maddening chomping she was displaying, and with her mouth wide open too.

A cough came from several rows back. Paige didn't care about that. Coughs weren't one of her trigger noises. Yet. At the rate her disorder was growing, any sound at all might someday set her off.

Another snuffle from the boy next to her came, loudly, drippily, and in addition to the sound festering in her mind, an unpleasant swooping sensation filled her body.

*Snuffle!*

*Pop!*

*Chomp!*

*Smack!*

*Snort!*

She had to fight back tears. How was she supposed to concentrate on anything, let alone her exam when there was *all this noise?*

A year passed before Paige started bringing earplugs to class. They were her only salvation, though she could barely hear the teachers most of the time, and they didn't block out the louder sounds like people popping their gum. But it was better than nothing. Still, some days she was forced to resort to mimicry to make the sounds leave her alone, and teenagers, when confronted with something they don't understand, were more inclined to ridicule her rather than simply ask her why. Her friends were few and far between, driven away by her oddities, such as they were.

At home, it wasn't much better. The sounds followed her no matter where she went. Even her baby sister's gentle breathing felt like daggers inside her brain. There was the dog, who drank from his water bowl, sloshing and splattering liquid everywhere, slopping it upon the kitchen floor. Paige couldn't stand to be in the same room as him, or the cat whenever she would lick herself.

But it wasn't the dog or the cat who truly made her life miserable, nor was it the students at her school or

the teachers who didn't understand her. It was her family. Her mother only jeered when Paige tried to explain the way the sounds thrashed about like eels, or pounded against her skull until she reacted. "You're too sensitive," she would say. "You just need to ignore it." Paige couldn't ignore it though. She tried. She tried so hard, but the longer she held it in, the worse it got.

Then there was her stepfather, Frank. He was a cacophony of every sound that set her off, and then some. He chewed his food like a cow chews its cud, slowly crunching and smacking with his mouth half-open. He cleared his throat, it seemed, every ten seconds, and it was long and growly, like some kind of wild animal. He whistled, and sometimes, Paige knew he did it just to spite her.

Frank was a cruel man in that regard. If she so much as glanced in his direction when he made one of her trigger sounds, he would be sure to do it again, louder and with more vigor. Though sometimes, he grew tired of her and would threaten her with beatings or punishment unless she stopped reacting. Once, he even put his hand around her neck and squeezed. Paige had fled to her room then, the only sanctuary in her personal hell.

It was another three years before Paige finally learned that her bizarre affliction had a name. Misophonia. She broke down in tears upon hearing that there were others like her, others who were affected by these noises too. For the first time in her life, she didn't feel so alone.

Now twenty years old and going to community college by day and working by night, Paige felt like life was starting to look up for her. She got by in class by recording the professors and playing back any parts she missed when she was safely in her room at home. At work, she was a cashier at a grocery store. Customers moved through the line quickly. Any noises they made were soon banished to the parking lot, and the noises were dulled for the first time in her life by the antidepressants she had been prescribed.

But as it usually did for Paige, life took a sharp turn. Normally, she was working most days, but she had a two-day weekend this time. She spent the majority of it reading in her room, until her mother called her down for dinner on the evening of the second day.

Her stomach lurched at the thought. Dinner was still a nightmare to go through. She wasn't allowed headphones or earplugs at the table. "You need to be sociable," her mother would say. Paige placed a bookmark between the pages of her novel and slunk downstairs.

"Set the table for dinner," said her mother.

Paige nodded and began placing the silverware around the rickety old table. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Frank sidle into the kitchen. Paige ignored him. Frank must not have appreciated her presence, or perhaps he only saw her as something to be toyed with, for he let out a sharp, shrill whistle, forming notes to a nonsensical song.

The plate Paige was holding shattered on the floor. Her whole body went rigid and she spun to face Frank. The glare on her face was one that could melt steel, she felt, although Frank only smirked back.

"Are you serious?" he said, putting on a snarl. "You'll be paying for that along with your rent this week!"

"Fine," she said, still shaken by her own reaction.

"Clean that up!"

Paige collected the broom and swept up her mistake, sitting down at the table once she'd disposed of the

ceramic shards.

Her mother placed the food on the table, and Paige's heart sank. Salad, corn on the cob, and steak tips. The crunchiest and chewiest food available. Sure enough, Frank started in on the corn first. The way he ate was maddening, methodically eating down each row of corn like a typewriter. Every crunch boomed in Paige's head like a bass drum, each smack a knife into the back of her mind.

It was unending. He moved on to the salad, chewing with his mouth open as if he had been raised by wolves. Paige realized she hadn't touched a bite of her own food. She was too drawn towards Frank's disgusting display. Her disorder refused to let her go. She was trapped.

It continued, boring into her brain like a thousand dull drills until finally, she couldn't take it anymore. Before she could stop herself, her hand was around Frank's wrist and she jerked it down from his mouth. Salad flew over the table and Frank stared at her, completely speechless.

"Shut up! Just shut up!" Paige shouted. "You're disgusting and you eat like a pig! I've had enough of it! Mom, I'm not eating down here anymore!"

"Paige!" Her mother was standing up, open-mouthed in shock at Paige's outburst.

Frank, on the other hand, puffed up spectacularly, his face reddening so much it was almost purple. Paige knew that look. She flinched away, though kept her hand closed around his arm, holding it down. "Get your hands off me!" he bellowed, standing up and looming over her.

At once, the hand around Frank's wrist suddenly burned hot. He yelped and jerked away. "What the hell did you do, you little shit?" he demanded. A bright red mark marred the tanned skin on Frank's previously untouched flesh.

"Nothing," Paige said, too stunned to be afraid. She stared at her hand but it seemed completely normal.

"Both of you, sit down!" said Paige's mother loudly. "You are both going to eat your dinner in peace. Paige, you're doing the dishes tonight since you were so rude to Frank. Frank, calm down and stop shouting, you're upsetting Erin!"

The baby was indeed fussing in her high chair. Paige and Frank both sat down, glaring at each other, though Paige was quick to look away and stare at her hand again. Whatever had happened there, it had scared Frank into leaving her alone. He finished his steak, though for some reason, his chewing didn't seem to be as bad. Maybe he was getting the hint at last.

Paige was finally able to take her own bite of salad. She bit into a piece of carrot and it snapped loudly beneath her teeth. Good. It served Frank right to have to listen to her make noise for once.

Apparently, he was annoyed by it, for he turned and glowered at her once again. Paige pretended not to notice him and took another bite of her salad.

Frank slammed his fist down on the table. "Stop mocking me!"

Even Paige's mother stared at him in surprise. "She's just eating," she said.

"She's not, she's mocking the way I chew my food!"

Paige and her mother looked at each other in confusion. "I'm eating my salad, and with my mouth closed." Paige had to force herself not to add 'unlike you' to the end of her sentence. She took another bite, emphasizing that her mouth was shut, like a normal human being.

Frank shook his head a little and stared at her, his eyes popping slightly from his head, giving him the appearance of derangement.

“What?” she said, putting up her hands in confusion.

“Whatever you’re doing, just knock it off!”

“I’m not *doing* anything!” To prove her point, she took another forkful of salad and brought it to her lips.

Frank reached over and struck the fork from her hand, sending lettuce scattering across the table. The fork fell to the ground with a clatter.

Paige stood up. “What the hell?”

“Language!” her mother chastised, though she was staring at Frank in disbelief. “Frank, what is going on with you?”

“I- I don’t know,” he admitted, and edged away from Paige. “She’s doing something though. Being annoying.”

Paige stepped away to get herself a new fork. What the hell was Frank’s deal? He was a cruel brute of a man, but he’d never acted quite like this before.

In her high chair, Erin’s fussing grew louder and her mother picked her up to calm her. “I think she’s running a fever,” she said, touching her forehead. “She’s hot.”

Paige returned to the table and started in on her corn. She became aware of Frank’s eyes on her and glanced up. His expression was one of deepest loathing. “Mom!” she said, “Would you tell him to stop staring at me?”

“Frank, maybe you should leave the table. Can you take Erin up to her room and give her some children’s Tylenol?”

Without taking his eyes off Paige, Frank rose from the table and finally turned away. He took the baby and stormed up the stairs. Paige’s mother shot her an incredulous look. “What on earth was that all about?”

“I have no idea,” Paige said, though secretly, she was pleased. If her eating had annoyed Frank this much, maybe he would understand what her misophonia was like in the future. She sighed. Or most likely, he would go right back to his obnoxious ways of tormenting her with the sounds she couldn’t stand.

Sure enough, when he came back downstairs, he was whistling a tuneless song. Paige prepared herself to get up and leave, but suddenly, she realized that the sound wasn’t affecting her like it usually did. Normally, the sound would push against the walls of her skull, biting at her inside until she reacted, but now, she could bear it. Now, it was nothing more than an annoyance.

She smirked at Frank, who stopped whistling to glare at her as she bit into her corn on the cob. “Here,” he said, handing her the baby, who was still fussing, before stalking away into the den. Soon the sounds of a football game filled the relative quiet of the house, growing steadily in volume. Paige knew he was doing that on purpose too, he knew she hated the sound of the TV through the walls.

She bounced Erin on her lap while her mother cleared the table. “Are you sick? Poor baby.”

Erin cried louder and Paige winced. Babies crying always set her off. Except her misophonic response wasn’t there this time. She blinked down at Erin, trying to figure out why nothing seemed to be bothering her

tonight. Well, whatever it was, she wasn't going to complain about it. Was this what it was like to live without misophonia? She'd had it since birth. She couldn't remember a time when sound didn't affect her so terribly.

Erin's wails were crescendoing, and Paige took her tiny hand in her own, trying to calm her. A cool sensation washed over her hand as she did, and at once, Erin's cries lessened. But now Paige felt off. She was cold, and sweat was beginning to form on her forehead. It was almost like...

She stared at Erin, who smiled toothlessly up at her. Paige bounced her sister again, trying to ignore the ache in her body as she did so. But she couldn't deny what had just happened. Somehow, she had taken Erin's fever away. Now she was the one who was sick. Erin giggled upon being bounced, and their mother turned towards them from putting away leftovers.

"The tylenol must be working," she said. "That was fast."

"Yeah," Paige agreed, though she knew that wasn't the case. "Mom, I think I'm coming down with something."

"Oh no you don't," said her mother. "You aren't getting out of washing the dishes tonight."

"It's not that," said Paige. "I think I've got a fever too."

Skeptically, her mother stepped over and placed a hand on her forehead. She drew back, alarmed. "You're burning up," she said and sighed. "You better get to bed. I'll take care of the dishes, but you owe me one. Go give Erin to Frank."

Paige walked into the den where Frank was lounging in a recliner. "Here," she said, and held out her sister. "Mom wants you to take her."

Frank grunted, and as he took Erin from Paige's grasp, his hand brushed hers and that fiery sensation went through her again. All at once, she felt better. The aches were gone from her bones, and she felt normal. A thrill shot through her and she turned to look at Frank, who was suddenly wiping his forehead. "I feel like shit," he muttered. "Get me a blanket."

Paige was quick to hand him a blanket from the couch before heading upstairs as fast as she could without attracting attention. She sat down on her bed and stared at her hands. What was going on? How was this possible? Somehow, she had taken a fever from her little sister and given it to Frank. She ran over the night again in her mind, and the revelation made her gasp out loud. Her misophonia! It was gone, it had to be! And Frank... that would explain his bizarre behavior earlier.

She fell back into her pillows, staring at the ceiling. It wasn't possible. It was a freak coincidence, it had to be. And yet, something told her that this was the real deal. There was only one way to tell. She would test the theory tomorrow in class. She got ready for bed, figuring she might as well get some sleep, but she couldn't keep her eyes closed, and the gnawing anticipation in her belly kept her wide awake for hours into the night.

When she did awaken, she was groggy and knew she hadn't gotten enough sleep. Well, that was all the better to test her theory. Misophonia was always worse if she was tired. She collected her things and got dressed, making sure to stuff a package of earplugs into her pocket, just in case. It was possible the whole thing was a fever dream or a fluke or something.

Downstairs, Frank was drinking his coffee before going to work. He looked awful, like he hadn't slept either. Paige's mother walked in from the den, toting Erin on her hip. "Frank," she said, "You look terrible."

Paige quickly smothered a smirk.

“Damn right I look terrible,” he snapped. “I feel like crap and I could barely sleep last night with all the racket you and the baby were making!”

“What racket?”

“You were breathing so loud, I’m surprised Miss Noise-hater over here didn’t hear you.”

“Well, I don’t know what you want me to say,” said her mom in surprise. “Like I tell Paige constantly, I have to breathe.”

“Whatever,” Frank grumbled. “I’m going to work.”

“See you at six.” They kissed and Paige crinkled her nose in disgust.

“I’m going too,” said Paige, and she headed out to her car. The music came on full blast when she started the engine. She hated when people blasted music in their cars, the bass music triggered her misophonia, so she kept hers loud too to drown it out. Today though, she felt like she wouldn’t need it, and she turned off her music completely. In fact, today, despite hardly sleeping, she felt better than she had in a long, long time.

When she got to the college, she parked and hurried into her classroom. It was her most dreaded class, Economics, for it was held in one of the lecture halls with fifty other students. She sat down right in the front instead of her usual back seat, and prepared for class. The other students filed in slowly, sitting down and taking out their laptops and notepads. One girl sat down right next to Paige and popped out a pack of gum.

Paige took a deep breath. This was it. Already, she could feel the usual anxiety she got from seeing someone with gum. The girl stuck the pieces in her mouth, starting to chew, and as Paige suspected, she chewed with her mouth open. But somehow, *somehow*, Paige was fine. The noise was annoying, sure, but it didn’t consume her mind like she was used to.

The lecture began and so did the sounds. The crunch of an apple being eaten came to her left, steady sniffles and coughs from all around, and of course, the girl next to her cracking her gum occasionally. *And none of it bothered Paige.*

It was gone. Her misophonia was truly gone. Paige felt like screaming joyfully in the middle of her lecture hall. She was free! Finally, at long last, she could function like a normal human being. For the first time, she took notes on her laptop, forgoing recording the lecture. Her earplugs lay forgotten in her pocket.

When she got home from school, she had a few hours before her shift at the grocery store began. “Hi mom!” she said when she got inside, then stopped. Her mother stood in the doorway, her phone hanging limply from her hand. She looked like she had been crying. “Mom? What’s wrong?”

“It’s your grandma,” she said, wiping at the tear tracks on her face. “She’s been diagnosed with stage four stomach cancer. We don’t know how much longer she has left, but it isn’t much.”

“Oh my god,” Paige said, and went to her mother, giving her a hug. “How did they not catch this sooner?”

“You know Grandma, she never goes to the doctor unless she absolutely has to. I just don’t know what to do.” She sniffled and squeezed her eyes shut like she was fighting off more tears. “I’m going to visit her now. Do you want to come too?”

Paige sighed and shook her head. “I can’t,” she said. “I have to work at five. But I’ll visit her tomorrow,

I'll switch my shift with someone."

"Okay. Okay." Her mother looked so helpless, Paige didn't know what to do.

Paige's shift at work went by slowly, and by midnight, she was finally done. She waited for her manager to lock up and walked out with her to their cars. "See you on Wednesday," she called.

Paige had managed to switch her shift, planning on visiting Grandma in the hospital tomorrow. She hated to admit it in such awful times, but her shift had gone extraordinarily well. Not a single customer had aggravated her, and she even got compliments for being cheerier than usual.

Back at home, Paige sat in her room quietly, thinking about the strange new power she had developed. She could save her grandmother, she knew that, but it came with a price. Either she would be stuck with stomach cancer herself, or she would have to pass it off to another person. She felt her forehead wrinkle the more she thought about it. No, there was nothing she could do. It wouldn't be right to doom a stranger with stomach cancer.

But what if they were already dying? Could Paige really do that? Could she inflict that level of pain and suffering on another human being, even to save her own grandmother? Paige knew the answer. That was when her own tears came, dripping down her face into her blankets.

As she lay in bed crying, raised voices came from her mother's room. Sniffing, Paige sat up to listen.

"I told you to quit making that noise!" Frank bellowed. "I'm sick of it!"

"Frank, what in heaven's name is wrong with you? Why are you acting like this? My mother is dying, and you're upset that I'm crying!"

"Blow your nose! Stop sniffing, it's driving me up the wall!"

"I can't help it!"

There was a brief silence and then a loud smack. Paige gasped as her mother cried out. Did he just *hit* her?

"Frank..."

"I told you to stop. Don't make me tell you again!"

The bedroom door opened and hurried footsteps made their way down the hall and into the den.

Paige sat up, her tears gone. In their place was a blazing fury. She stood from her bed and went down to the den. "Mom?"

"Paige? Go back to bed, it's late."

"Did he hit you?"

"Paige..."

"Mom. Did he hit you?"

"I think he's just stressed out with work and the news of grandma."

"Don't make excuses for him! Kick him out!"

"I'm sure it was a mistake. It won't happen again."

"Are you for real, Mom? If I had a boyfriend and he hit me, would you tell me to stay with him?"

"It's not the same thing, Paige. This is complicated."

“No it isn’t.”

“Paige!” Her mother came towards her and even in the dim light, Paige could see the red mark on her face.

She gasped. “Oh my god, Mom. This is not okay!”

“Go back to bed.”

“Mom-”

“I mean it, Paige! Go to bed, now!”

Paige turned and marched back to her room, the rage in her stomach still boiling. Where did he get off thinking he could hit her mother and she would be okay with it? And yet, there was nothing Paige could do. She was smaller and weaker than Frank, and she was sure he would turn on her too if she tried to start something. Not only that, but it was her fault that this had happened. She had given him her disorder and the rage that came with it.

Because she had a superpower.

Paige looked up, staring at the door, thinking hard. Could she do it? The image of the mark across her mother’s face floated before her eyes.

The morning came, and Paige hadn’t slept a wink. But that didn’t matter. She was skipping her classes today. One day wouldn’t hurt, and besides, she had something more important to do. She was visiting her grandma in the hospital.