

## **Surely You Jest, by Brittany Petersen**

*Presented to the Chicago Literary Club and the Fortnightly on March 6, 2015*

Boop boop boop!

For those of you who may not know, medical science has in the past 15 years coined the term "misophonia," also known as selective sound sensitivity syndrome, for people who strongly dislike certain noises that are caused by other humans.

Boop boop boop!

This hypersensitivity to certain trigger sounds causes "stress, anger, irritation, and, in extreme cases, violent rage."<sup>1</sup> The most common triggers of misophonia are considered, by most normal human beings, to be mild noises; eating sounds, including lip smacking and swallowing, tend to top the list.<sup>2</sup> You may have endured this unpleasant experience already tonight.

Boop boop boop!

Let me set the scene: I am already on edge when we get on this plane. I am an anxious traveler anyway—not because I'm scared of flying, but because I don't like being in transit at all. Even commuting on the el to and from work is an exercise of psychological endurance. The problem is that I want to be where I'm going without having to expend any time or energy to get there. I think this is partly a lack of patience, which I admit is a persistent character flaw of mine. But the transit anxiety also contains a fear that something will go wrong, that I somehow won't make it to my destination. Not like I'll die, but like something less serious but still really bad will happen and the minor annoyance of being in transition will stretch out into something much more painful.

So that is my foundational emotional state as we walk onto this plane. Add to that, that on this particular day, I am traveling with my boyfriend, Rocky, to spend Christmas with his family. Now I'd met most of his family at a wedding the year before, and his mom had visited us in Chicago earlier that year, so at least I wasn't being introduced for the first time. But it *was* the first time I'd be spending the Christmas holidays with anyone other than my own family. This was a big deal.

My only other experience with this type of thing was when I'd spent Thanksgiving downstate with Rocky and his uncle's family the year before. I had agreed to forego my usual holiday time with my own family so that Rocky could dictate where we spent Thanksgiving, with the understanding that we'd spend that Christmas with my family, and then be on a regular holiday rotation year after year: Thanksgiving with one family, Christmas with the other. It was a good plan, but apparently I wasn't prepared for the separation anxiety of year one, because on Turkey Day Eve, I drank most of a box of wine and then called my grandmother, sobbing, to tell her I missed her. She had to console me for the better part of an hour. That was the year of the epic Black Friday Hangover.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/misophonia-is-a-newly-identified-condition-for-people-hypersensitive-to-sound/2014/12/01/7c392782-69ba-11e4-a31c-77759fc1eacc\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/misophonia-is-a-newly-identified-condition-for-people-hypersensitive-to-sound/2014/12/01/7c392782-69ba-11e4-a31c-77759fc1eacc_story.html)

<sup>2</sup> <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/23/please-stop-making-that-noise/>

So now I'm on this plane, on my way to Christmas—a longer and even more important holiday—and I am looking down the barrel of this new test of my ability to keep it together during the holidays. Let's just say I am not feeling optimistic. I actively planned not to buy a box of wine.

So we step on this tiny plane, which will fly us from Detroit, Michigan, to Augusta, Maine. It's only an hour-long flight, so the plane is more like a flying shuttle bus. It's a 1-2 configuration, with one seat on the left and two on the right. We sit down in the sixth row, on the right, with Rocky in the window seat and me on the aisle. The woman in the lone seat on the left is fiddling with her backpack. It's clear something is going off from within it—

Boop boop boop!

—and she is trying to turn it off. But her efforts are half-hearted. She doesn't seem to want to lean all the way over to dig inside her bag, so she's sort of pawing at it, nudging it with her fingers, hoping she'll accidentally hit the right button through the fabric of the backpack. After about 30 seconds she stops trying.

I'm watching this intently, and when I see her give up on turning it off, I nudge Rocky and whisper to him, "That woman won't turn off that sound." He looks puzzled for a second—"What sound?" Apparently it isn't as pervasive in his auditory space as it is in mine, so I quietly repeat it—"Boop boop boop!" He listens for a moment, then cracks a huge grin. "That really bugs you, doesn't it?" he says. My response is a cold-eyed scowl, and he settles into his seat with his book, completely unperturbed.

Now perhaps I should pause to explain that I am a very polite person. I'm from Iowa. It's a thing. We are very polite. So much so that we are raised not to complain, not to intrude in others' business. Sitting on this plane, those natural urges are waging a huge war with my anxious state; on the one hand, I really want to mind my own business. On the other hand, I am in an enclosed space with a repetitive noise, which is making me want to throw this woman's bag out the airplane's plug door. The alarm is filling up the entire space of my being, and my anxiety level is rising at an alarming rate.

Boop boop boop!

Fast forward six and a half minutes. The forward door is now closed, we are taxiing toward takeoff, and I am basically crawling out of my skin. I look at Rocky, pleading with my eyes. He asks if I'd like him to intervene and ask the woman to turn off the alarm. I collapse into a whispered state of outright begging for him to save me the embarrassment of confronting her myself. And with the swagger of a man never scorned, Rocky leans over me to address the woman as my cheeks burn. "Excuse me," he says loudly, "But do you know where that beeping is coming from?"

The woman across the aisle responds immediately. "Yes, it's my medication alarm," she says. "It'll shut off by itself."

He nods. "Oh great, thank you!"

And that was that. No apology. Just the promise of an end. I regain some hope; perhaps the alarm is on a timer and will give up; I just have to endure a few more seconds.

Boop boop boop!

Fast forward 10 more minutes. I can't tell if this woman is delusional or just a dirty rotten liar. We're still waiting to take off, the beeping still hasn't stopped, and I am beginning to lose my composure. Other passengers are starting to notice and grumble, whispering things like, "Turn that damn thing *off!*" under their breath. The woman is either ignoring them or she can't hear them over her blaring alarm. I begin to wonder what medication she was supposed to take.

Finally, our plane begins to pick up speed, and we lift off—and the beeping is gone! It finally turned itself off!! My body is flooded with relief and gratitude and congratulations for myself, for not having made a scene. I settle into my seat. After about two minutes, the plane settles into its altitude, and...

Boop boop boop!

The roar of the engines had covered up the sound for a few precious minutes, but the glory did not last. The alarm hasn't turned itself off, it had just been covered. I am now livid.

If you think I'm overreacting, you're right, I am. But I would point out that beyond just misophonia, sound torture is actually a thing. In a footnote on a 2005 U.S. interrogation program memo, the Central Intelligence Agency noted that "white noise and loud sounds" are part of the "detention conditions" maintained at all of its detention facilities.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Department of the Army describes such repetitive noise as "futility," that is, the perpetrator uses the tedium of ongoing, unpleasant sound as psychological torture to engender a feeling of hopelessness.<sup>4</sup> It's sonic warfare, intended to break a person's spirit.

According to a 2008 article in the *New Yorker*, "The idea of using music in psychological warfare goes back to at least the Second World War, when Soviet forces under siege in Leningrad defiantly broadcast Dmitri Shostakovich's *Seventh Symphony* into no man's land and the Office of War Information relayed jazz and other democratic sounds into Nazi-occupied Europe." The magazine adds that, "Since the beginning of American operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, music has routinely been used during interrogations at Guantánamo and elsewhere."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, sound torture comes in all forms and at all levels of existence. In a recent study, scientists identified the sounds that are most annoying to the vast majority of people, including both those with and those without misophonia. The top five sounds identified as the worst in the world are absolutely horrid: a knife in bottle, a fork on a glass, chalk on a blackboard, a ruler on a bottle, and nails on a blackboard.<sup>6</sup> Even listing them makes me cringe.

So it dawns on me, sitting on this plane, that there is only one explanation for this predicament. This woman is some kind of evil scientist, experimenting on her fellow passengers with sound torture. It's the only conceivable explanation for why I am physically squirming in my seat. I feel as though I am in physical pain. The beeping is like a dagger in my ear, hitting my self control over and over again. I'm not sure how long I can hold out. Meanwhile, she sits serenely staring straight ahead. Her face is a mask of calm.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://motherboard.vice.com/read/why-sound-torture-works>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/futility-music>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/futility-music>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-the-most-annoying-sound-in-the-world-75317235/?no-ist>

Boop boop boop!

Then something happens. About forty-five minutes through the hour-long flight, completely unprompted, she ends the experiment. She reaches into her bag, deftly locates the offending alarm, and with a quick flick of the wrist, she shuts it off.

A strange, unfamiliar silence surrounds me, broken only by the steady snore of my boyfriend, completely unencumbered by my anxious sensitivities. As my breathing slows and I sink into waves of quiet relief, still tinged with intense frustration, I have but one thought in my head:

Surely you jest.

Also, I need to get me a box of wine.