



Source: Andrew E. Kramer, 'Blackwater resumes guarding US envoys in Iraq', *New York Times online*, 22/09/07.

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Grace couldn't say what had started it but it had something to do with the city. She'd moved there when she was still inexperienced and shy. She'd moved there to get away from something and the noise of the city had helped her forget whatever it was she'd come there to forget. She'd done all manner of noisy jobs and right now was shift-working at a call centre on the 14th floor of an office tower block. She, and the 50 or so co-workers who sat at the rows of desks in the grey rectangular room, talked non-stop in ten hour stints, shouting over each other and the air conditioning thrum. It was the noisiest time in a long time, but she was saving up money.

As soon as the shift was over, too impatient to wait for the lift, she bolted down the emergency stairs, which emerged in the underground car park below the tower. From here she followed the exit road up onto the street, where the full force of the city noise hit her with its ringing punch.

Dog-tired as she always was, Grace never went home straight away. After the din of the human voice shouting all day, she needed to find another kind of noise to drown it out.

The best antidote she'd found was to wander the city streets, her body tuning in to the whine of sirens and reversing alarms, to the blaring horns and bass lines of speeding cars, to the bleeps and pulsars of technology. Grace was addicted to noise and right now she particularly loved all noise that wasn't human.

She would drift in this way for a couple of hours, constructing a route from the sounds around her, until she could walk no more. At home, before sleeping, she worked on a letter she was drafting to the council, a kind of lone-voice campaign against noise abatement societies, arguing the case for noise pollution. When she'd first put pen to paper many months ago, her argument had been clear and focussed: if people chose to live in a city, they should expect it to be loud, unpredictable and invasive. On the whole, she pointed out, the noise from commercial premises, leisure facilities and transport systems only accounted for around 14% of a city's disturbances; the remaining 86%—stuff like dogs barking, children crying, phones ringing, arguments, swearing, cursing, banging, etc came from domestic premises, was man-made and therefore not the city's responsibility.

That was how the letter had started out. She didn't see the ramshackle pile of crumpled papers, old envelopes and half-used journals that it had become. She didn't see that the close, neat scrawl, had now mutated into nothing much more than a list with pseudo-scientific

observations, like: 'It is interesting to note that human beings hear directionally as part of their survival instinct and are naturally fitted with 'receivers'. Just as our ancestors' brains were wired for survival and could detect the sound of a cracked twig in a forest, our brains have evolved to detect the source of urban and technological sounds. I hear a car change gears through the sound of heavy rain on tarmac, I detect the difference between the rush of the high speed train and the local sprinter. I hear the rattle of shopping trolleys being stolen from the late-night supermarket on the street parallel to mine. I hear the rumble of delivery lorries and the rumble of dustbin trucks and know the difference.'

Sometimes Grace just listed favourite sounds: 'I like the whoosh of automatic doors. I like the turned-up volume of next door's TV. I like the sound of gun-fire. I like the density of noise compression.'

To Grace's mind it was still a letter, still a work-in-progress, that only needed a little tweaking here and there, before she popped it in the post. Maybe she believed that when the letter was finished, when she'd archived every single noise, then it'd be time to quit her job at the call centre. It'd be time to leave the city for good and retire to the leafy suburbs, where she'd live off her savings. Maybe, she believed that's when she'd finally quit her noise addiction and be content with peace and quiet. But she didn't like what she'd heard about the silence that could be found in those quiet residential suburbs where lights were left on or off for a long time, where clothes hung stiff on washing lines because no one noticed they'd been left out over many days and nights in rain and shine, where post-boxes were over-stuffed with newspapers and junk mail. She didn't want to ever hear that kind of silence, the absence of sound after the din of years spent living in the city, the silence of its inhabitants living alone, unnoticed and uncared for.

That was her thought as she crossed the wide street, her face thrust forward, her eyes wide and alert, as she weaved her way through the traffic, turning herself to the evening. A neon sign up ahead announced a bar or a club, sending out little popping noises as it flashed alternately between 'OPEN' and 'FOREVER', 'FOREVER' and 'OPEN.' Grace hovered above the scuzzy red carpeted steps that led down to the entrance, her head tilted to one side, listening. The sound of an electric guitar tuning up, or strumming a chord change, a chord change from A to G maybe. A major key, not a minor one. She thought she would add this sound to the others in her letter.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Cathy Naden.*