

ALL THE SOUNDS OF THE EARTH ARE LIKE MUSIC

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The telephone rang just as Miriam finished loading the breakfast dishes into the dishwasher. Even though Ella would arrive in a few minutes, Miriam preferred to leave a clean kitchen. She considered it an act of civility. And although neither woman had ever mentioned it, she thought Ella appreciated the gesture.

"Why don't you leave that for the *Dinst*?" Her mother-in-law, who was seated at the breakfast table dunking bits of English muffin into a saucer of honey, looked up to scold her. "You're going to spoil her."

"Ella has plenty to do."

"But it's her job."

"Not in this house," Miriam said. "What's the big deal about putting a few cereal bowls and coffee cups in the dishwasher?" She straightened and reached for the wall phone next to the sink. "Good morning." She spoke in her cheerful morning voice.

"You didn't get a call either," Her sister Sherry, said by way of salutation, maybe more of a salvo.

"No, but it's just as well. I've worked every day this week. My fridge is running on empty."

"Then do you want to go to Thrifty Market with me? They're having a special on skirt steaks."

"I never make it. David thinks the meat's too stringy."

"You have to slice it on the diagonal. Your knife needs to be kept really flat. You've seen them cut salmon... same principle. Anyway, c'mon. You said your fridge was empty."

"I can't. Sorry."

"Why not?"

Miriam debated telling a lie, *I'm taking Mina to the doctor, or I've got a teacher conference, or Ella isn't coming*, - but decided against it. She was a lousy liar. "I'm playing in the league match."

"Oh?" There was a silence. "I thought you were making yourself free in case you got a call to substitute."

"Yes, but I didn't get a call. Then Susan phoned to say they were short a player, and I said okay... I mean I am still part of the team, besides I could use the exercise." Miriam sighed. Why was she so defensive? "We could go to the grocery this afternoon," she offered.

"No thanks. I've got other plans this afternoon. You're not the only one with things to do."

"C'mon Sher, don't be like that. It's no big deal."

"Easy for you to say; It always works out for you."

"It doesn't always work out for me."

"Oh yes it does. How many days have you worked this month?"

"I don't know. I haven't counted...maybe ten."

"See. I've only worked four days and Monday is the twenty-second of the month already."

"You know it's only because that teacher was in an accident. I got lucky."

"But you were the one who got the call to come in and substitute weren't you?" Sherry's voice was full of accusation.

"Sherry, first of all, Mrs. Sherman is an English teacher. A twelfth-grade honors English teacher, for God's sake. Shakespeare, Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner. I know the material. That's what I am an English teacher."

"Not anymore. You're just a substitute, same as me. Anyone can follow a lesson plan. I could teach the class too. And I need the money. You don't."

"Sherry, stop. I don't decide who gets called. It's all chance."

"That's just the point. You've always been the lucky one."

Miriam looked at the clock and at her mother-in-law who was pointedly rustling the newspaper as she turned the pages. She didn't have time for this conversation. She looked at her bare feet. Her shoes lay just under the counter. She sat down on the kitchen stool, cupping the phone between her shoulder and ear using her freed-up hands to put on her socks and tennis shoes. She noticed that one of the pom-poms on her sock was hanging on by a thread.

"Anyway, we need to talk about Pesach."

"What about it?"

"Well, what's the menu?"

"The usual...I'll do my apricot chicken. You'll do the fish."

"Why do I always have to do the fish?"

"Because, you know how to make *gefulte* fish...I don't."

"It'll stink up my kitchen."

"Why don't you use jarred fish?" Miriam's mother-in-law called from her seat. Clearly, she was listening to Miriam despite the page rattling. "I know a good recipe to doctor it up. A little onion, a few carrots; nobody will even know the difference."

"Mina suggests we use jarred fish. She says nobody will even know the difference," Miriam told her sister.

"Oh God, is that snoop eavesdropping on our conversation?"

"Why, yes," Miriam said sweetly. "She's feeling better every day. Thanks for asking. I'll tell her you asked about her."

Sherry snorted. "You wimp...anyway, that woman can't even boil water for tea. Tell her the difference is store-bought fish tastes like caca."

Miriam sighed. "Sherry, what do you want to do?"

"I guess I'll have to make the fish."

"Good."

"You know it's your husband and your son who are the biggest fans of my fish."

"I know."

"By rights, you should make the fish."

"Except I don't know how, I've never made it in my life. If I made fish it would taste worse than caca"

"I could teach you."

"No thanks... I'll make the soup."

"I always make the soup. I make the best soup."

"I know you do," Miriam tried to sound supportive. "Just don't take on more than you're comfortable doing."

"Now you want to make me feel guilty. I can do it. I'll make it early and freeze it."

Miriam looked at the clock again. "Sher, I've got to go. I'll call you later."

"But we haven't settled on the desserts."

"Sherry, Passover is almost a month away."

"So what? It's good to think ahead. Anyway, shall I pick up anything for you at the Thrifty?"

"No thanks. I told you I'm going to the supermarket later. I have a list as long as my arm."

"You should go to Thrifty. That store has much better quality and much better prices. Anyway, I'll pick you up some nice chopped meat...maybe you'll make a meatloaf."

Through her kitchen window, Miriam watched a blue Lexus SUV pull into her drive.

"Sherry, they're here. I love you. But I've gotta go. How about lunch later?"

"How can you make a lunch date? Don't you have your tennis ladies?"

"I'll blow them off."

"I'd have to stop home and put away the perishables first. Besides, I might get inspired. I might want to cook something."

"Then what about tomorrow? We'll do the menu from soup to nuts."

"You mean from hard-boiled eggs to sponge cake." Sherry giggled.

"Right, so, what do you say? Lunch tomorrow?"

"What if you get a call to teach?"

"I'll turn it down."

"Well, if I get called, I'm going to take it. I told you I've only worked four days this entire month."

"Okay, so if you aren't teaching, then can we have lunch?"

"We'll see. Call me in the morning." She lowered her voice to a whisper.

"And don't invite Minnie-ha-ha. Just us, okay?"

"Yes, okay..."

There were two long impatient toots from the waiting car.

"Sherry, they're blowing the horn I need to hang up."

"Oh tell them to blow it out their ass."

"Such elegant language."

"It's just an expression" Sherry laughed. "Grandma used to say it all the time when she was teaching me to drive. I'd be going kinda slow down the middle of the street and some driver would start honking. '*Blow it out your ass,*' Grandma would say. Then she'd say to me '*Don't let it bother you, Sherilah. They have no manners.*'"

Miriam laughed. "Where did she ever learn that?"

The horn honked again. "Sherry, let me go. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Anyway, I'm going to drop you off some chopped meat. I'll just leave it in your fridge."

The horn sounded again.

"Sherry, whatever. I'm holding them up. Please..."

"Okay, okay. Goodbye and Good luck." The phone went dead.

Miriam looked at the phone, wondering if she ought to call her sister back. "Shit," she whispered as she put the phone in its cradle.

Again the horn sounded- three short, impatient toots.

"Your friends are so impatient," Mina clucked. "A person should be more considerate."

"We've got a match; they don't want to be late."

"So what did your sister say?"

"She thinks we should have meatloaf for dinner."

Mina shook her head. "That's all she's got to think about? What you should cook for supper?"

Miriam bent to kiss her mother-in-law's powdery cheek. "I'll see you later. Ella will make you a nice lunch."

"I thought you said the refrigerator was empty"

"There's plenty for lunch."

"Like what?"

"Ma, please—there's eggs, there's tuna, there's cottage cheese."

"I had the cottage cheese yesterday."

"Ella can make you a nice gooey grilled cheese sandwich like you like. Or else just tell her what you feel like having."

"You know, darling, I don't want to be any trouble. I can eat anything."

"You're no trouble," Miriam assured the older woman. "We love having you. And you're getting stronger every day. You'll be home in no time."

"I hope so. I like to be around my own things." Mina smiled at Miriam, holding out her mug. "Would you mind just hotting this up before you leave? You really ought to have a tea cosy."

Miriam took the mug without a word and refilled it from the new Michael Graves kettle with its cheery blue- bird perched on the spigot. "Do you want a fresh tea bag?"

"Oh no," Mina looked at the soggy bag that sat on a saucer near her elbow. "There's still life in this one. I'll just sit here and wait for the *Dinst* to help me dress."

"Ella. Her name is Ella. She'll be here soon."

"I know her name. I'm not senile just yet," Mina said. She looked at her daughter-in-law who had her back to her, gathering her things. "You've got something hanging from the back of your shoe."

"It's just a pom-pom." Miriam stooped to rip off the droopy, little ball. "Who cares?"

"I was just trying to be helpful," Mina said "You must have gotten up on the wrong side of bed this morning. You're so grouchy."

"Sorry," Miriam apologized "I guess I'm feeling a little pressured."

"Pressured? Why should you be pressured? You don't have to go out to work like you do. I'm sure my son makes a good living...doesn't he?"

"Mina, please" Miriam interrupted "Not now. We'll talk about this later."

"Sure, don't listen to me. I'm just an old lady. What do I know? If you want to be a feminist, be my guest." She picked up the newspaper.

"I'll be back around two," Miriam said "Maybe you'd like to take a ride with me to go shopping?"

"Perhaps." Mina spoke from behind her curtain of newsprint. "If you're in a better mood."

Once more, the horn sounded. This time it was a prolonged, I'm-leaning-on-the-horn, last chance blast.

"Oh blow it out your ass," Miriam muttered picking up her sports bag and heading for the door. "I'll be right there."