

VALERIE COMPTON

Sound Advice

ARRIVAL SIGNALS THE END'S AT HAND. Arriving is the start of leaving again. And leaving is a moral failure (she believes), like behaving selfishly or neglecting to apologize.

Every year it is the same. She opens her suitcase on the chenille cover of a rust-limbed, sprung bed and startles at the sight of her own familiar things. She shakes the wrinkles from her clothes, wipes out cupboards, mops the floors and rinses the inside of her refrigerator with bleach and water. She forces up the sash windows in each musty room. This takes a while. There are only three operable windows, but they stick, as if resistant to change. Every time, she ends up using tools (a cat's paw and a hammer bought for this purpose years ago at Clark's in Montague, when there was a Clark's in Montague). She airs the rooms, then scrubs the tub and cleans her filthy self, bathing in water so hot it stings. Free after forty-nine weeks of nine-to-five, Mellie Lank should feel entitled to a rest. But she does not. She checks her mailbox and finds the visitor information package she requested by telephone ten days earlier. The Tourist Junk, she thinks of it, reading guiltily. Glossy paper hot in her hands, the way *Cosmopolitan* felt when she was a teenage girl unused to lipstick.

This is her ritual. It has served her for years.

She reads until her eyes begin to ache. In the falling dark, she tilts her chair and looks around her cottage, once her father's mother's home. She closes her eyes and tries to remember her grandmother, but fails. Over time, she has discovered, memory fades to nothing. The house isn't any help. Long before she was offered the chance to buy it, the building was stripped of her grand-

mother's things. I should have paid attention then, Mellie thinks every summer. (Then, she was a child.)

Her eyes fall on the visitors' guide in her lap — walkers with backpacks climbing fragile sand dunes and model families in Cow's ice cream T-shirts. The willing and consumable island. She shifts, and the shiny guidebook slides heavily to the floor.

Mellie lies in her musty, broken-down bed, eyes tightly closed against the too-dark rural night.

Listen.

She both loves and fears this word—has not heard half of what's been said to her in years. Partly this is her body's fault, partly (she knows) it is her own stubbornness. Evading disappointment, is how she thinks of it. What point is there in wearing hearing aids? The sounds she most wants to hear are not part of her daily life.

L-i-s-t-e-n. She mouths the word slowly, tastes its dry, green apple sharpness.

Even on the south shore of the island, where the rolling hills have been subdued by logging, you can hear it. The deep, faded voice of the land.

She is sure you could hear it. If you lived here. If you paid attention.

In the morning, dirt leers at Mellie from every surface. She cleans and cleans. Mellie has no more claim on this island than any visitor. Lanks have lived on southern Prince Edward Island since the land was settled, in the early 1800s, but Mellie works in Toronto now, and returns to her childhood home only for holidays. What can she possibly give back to this place, living the easy life for three weeks in a weathered grey clapboard cottage with a lock on the door?

Give back: one of the phrases she hears at work, part of the idiom of her Bay Street office. Rhetoric, her mother would say.

What do you owe the place? her mother had asked at Christmas. You should go somewhere else for a change. Take a real holiday. Why stick your head in the sand?

Mom. You don't understand, Mellie had snapped, sounding for all the world like the hostile teenager she once was, not a thirty-six-year-old professional woman.

I feel completed there.

This came from nowhere. Where had this come from? The words slipped out, smearing the air and falling with a damp thud to the floor, where they lay puddled on her mother's pristine white laminate. Mellie stood stunned for a moment. When she looked up, her mother had resumed efficiently cutting the tails off green beans with a sharp stainless-steel knife.

In the tourist junk Mellie studies warmly-lit photos of families dancing on front porches fake as stage sets. House parties like concerts, got up for paying guests.

Over a supper of toast and tea she reads ads for auction sales in the local paper, decides to buy a stuffed chair or a rocker, deck out her little summer house with a measure of comfort. Lately Mellie has grown tired of camping out. She enjoys her solitude, but she is older now and wants something more to come home to.

I was meant to live in the 1950s, Mellie tells colleagues over coffee at work, when domesticity was an art instead of an irony and everyone felt at home in the world. (How she imagines that time.)

Her family had a crank phone when she was a little girl. This was in the 1970s, before the rural parts of the island went to rotary dials. The receiver was Bakelite, so heavy you had to use both hands to hold it up, and there were intricate workings housed in a box on the wall made of a lovely, dark, polished wood. The box had a handle you turned to ring the operator, or someone on your party line. There were three other families on Mellie's line: her grandparents (three short rings), an aunt and uncle (two longs and a short) and the Rapsons, down the road, who didn't get many calls. The Rapsons were two longs. But a long ring could be hard to distinguish from a short, when you got right down to it. That was the excuse Mrs. Rapson would use for picking up on other people's calls. Oh, I'm sorry, my dear, she would say, when Mellie asked her to get off the line, I thought you were us.

Her relatives invite her to visit. Occasionally, one aunt or another might come by. This confuses Mellie.

Like Mellie's mother (their sister), her island aunts are managerial, and extremely competent. She does not know how they got to be this way. The aunts she remembers from childhood went by their married names: Mrs. John Leard, Mrs. Robert MacMillan, Mrs. Lanny Campbell. When she pictures them they are folding laundry or vacuuming floors or watching soap operas on television in the afternoon. As soon as her cousins started school, Mellie's aunts got jobs. They went to work as secretaries, and instead of soap operas, they became interested in rose gardening and macramé. Then there was a stage Mellie missed while she was away at university—and now the aunts are chic and sophisticated. They are not secretaries anymore, they are administrative professionals. Helen works in a law office, Bernie for the city, Sylvia for a company that makes the netting used in lobster traps.... Mellie cannot reconcile these smart, semi-professional women with the placid, maternal aunts of her childhood, aunts who served crust-less sandwiches and Kool-aid in plastic cups. They are conspiratorial and canny now, like mutinous sailors.

The aunts look askance at Mellie's rickety cottage, for which she pays a double land tax as a non-resident. It is only the decrepitude of the house that concerns them, but Mellie does not know this. She feels a constant guilt, owning land real islanders are surely more deserving of than she.

There is no way she can stay. She is accustomed, now, to her lucrative job, and the pleasure she takes in her skill. She has invigorating work—sifting numbers like sand, for the secrets they hold. The chance to learn more: a treasure like sea glass.

There is no way she can stay away. Work is only work, and she has nowhere else to go. Even her parents live in Toronto now, absorbed in lives that leave no room for reminiscence or reflection, seemingly comfortable in their pseudo-colonial house on a cul-de-sac that speaks nothing to Mellie of home.

Overnight it rains, and getting out of her car the next morning, Mellie can feel the cool, watery air rinse her skin clean. She

looks around and is dazzled by the delicate beauty of her island. She strolls a red clay lane, the dawning day rising beside her in subtle, perfectly harmonized layers of light: apricot, cream, lemon, white, and a blue so wan, so indeterminate, so unwilling to declare itself, it is hardly a colour at all.

At the sale, she sees two aunts, Helen and Sylvia. In the seconds it takes them to register her presence, Mellie reads Helen's lips.

... junky ... back to the car, girl!

Mellie smiles, waves at them both, mimes empty ears by flinging her hands from her head, rolling her eyes with a wry smile. Her hearing aids are in their case in her pocket, and she leaves them there. But this does not faze Helen, who hugs Mellie hello and starts yelling.

... did ... know ... yet! ... thought ... next week! ... doing ... sales! ... come ... Gaa ... Cove!

Sure, says Mellie.

She had intended to go to the auction at Guernsey Cove, but it always unsettles her to run into Helen, who was the only relative to react with what her audiologist liked to call "sound advice" when her hearing faded, suddenly and mysteriously, at age fifteen. Helen's mother had been nearly deaf, so Helen grew up shouting, and in awe of hearing aids. But Mellie's reaction to her own loss had been different. In high school there was a stigma attached to wearing hearing aids. She had felt different, set apart, uneasy. Nothing anyone said could change that, not even Helen's *Never Mind. Nothing important has changed.*

In the car she cleans her aids, twists them in. They are sleek and expensive, brilliantly designed to disappear into her ears. She thinks of them as nearly perfect objects: precious bits of electronic ingenuity. Still, she rarely wears them. Not even at work, where they only magnify the high pitches of office chatter and the annoying hum of her computer. After nearly twenty years, Mellie has learned to prize silence, believes she is lucky to live mostly without sound.

At Guernsey Cove Mellie parks her car with a hundred others in a stubble field. The goods have been arranged inside a grading barn. *Potatoes*. Mellie recognizes from childhood the fungal tang of the close air and the brainless look of the top-heavy, wheeled conveyors tilting like prehistoric beasts along the back wall of the barn. The building has been meticulously swept out (there are several large push-brooms standing near the door) but even so every object inside is covered with a fine layer of dirt.

Walking through the building, she feels a sudden creeping revulsion for the misery on which auction sales feed, all the more overt in this dank, cellar-smelling place with its dust motes tumbling from the overhead lights. She considers the people collected in knots around objects, imagines their talk in sad snatches: *A horrible week Oh, come on, Lil, there must be another way*

Near a table of linen and cotton cloths, she stops to turn her hearing aids up high, to compensate for the ambient noise. (She does not want Helen to shout at her here.) Now she can hear two women in conversation. One, tiny and with a sharp little mouth like a bird's beak, is holding her larger friend firmly by the elbow. Mellie listens: she can't resist. Their voices are sanguine, and normally eavesdropping is impossible for her (it is difficult to lip-read without seeming to stare—but at a sale, everyone stares).

Was it the cancer? the beaked woman asks.

No, no, says the other, with a parched, pale grey mouth. It was her hip. She fell and broke it in March. And at that age, what can they do? Caught the pneumonia.

Isn't that always the way?

She had some lovely things, though, didn't she?

Yes. Yes. Lovely.

MELLIE.

Helen. Oh. Mellie had forgotten to watch for her aunts. Oh, hi, she says, trying to modulate her voice to match those around her. Where is Sylvia?

There she is behind you! Helen shouts. Next to Willie Ferguson! Trying on rings!

Mellie sighs and scans the crowd for Sylvia, but she cannot see her quiet aunt. Wherever she looks, there is only a sea of strangers. Hearing is like this, Mellie thinks, you listen and listen until whatever nonsense you misheard comes clear to you as something else.

Mellie and Helen wave at Sylvia to get her attention, then begin to walk toward her.

Oh, hello, Helen, says a woman behind Mellie, stepping in close to her shoulder to allow the crowd to flow past. Hello, Sylvia.

Helen and Sylvia nod at this woman, who only squints at Mellie.

Marge. How are you? they say together.

Did ya go to the funeral? Marge asks.

Helen and Sylvia shake their heads.

It was lovely. Beautiful singing. Well attended.

Helen and Sylvia nod, say nothing.

Well, I see you're showing your niece around. I'll let ya look.

Sylvia turns to Helen once the woman Marge has moved on, erasing the mask of composure on her face. I didn't know Marge Vickerson knew Anna Rogers—

The creature! says Helen, stomping one foot. She goes to all the funerals, just to see who's there! Then, after, she goes to the sale to see what they had in their house!

Mellie sways a little, reaches up with both hands at once to turn the volume down.

Seeing this, Helen opens the bag she has been clutching like a shield all morning. Have a mint, Mellie, she says, pulling one plump candy out of its depths. You need to relax.

The three women move on through the sale, and Mellie sucks on her mint, suddenly sorry she knows so little about these aunts—how they have managed, what they have lost, where their mistakes have taken them. She knows they will never tell their secrets. Helen and Sylvia perform their lives as roles of circum-spection and agreement. It is their own long habit with themselves, and it is how they understand women should be.

Lots of dealers here, Sylvia says. Not many tourists. Things'll go low.

The auctioneer and his assistants begin their show, and the crowd quiets. Mellie gazes at the clumsy parade of stuff. She feels plagued with anxiety. Why doesn't the island love her anymore? She turns down her hearing aids and the voice of the crowd takes on the mumbly twang of a country and western singer: Oh, why did you do it Mellie? Why did you do what you've gone and done?

(What do you want, Mellie? Do you know what you want?)

Pulling herself up out of her slouch in the chair, she tells herself, It doesn't matter. The holiday will be over in days.

Waiting at the barn door for Helen and Sylvia later, Mellie moves aside to allow the crowd to pass and hears behind her back a harsh, newly familiar voice: Only people who move away need to have antiques, the woman yells. People from here know who they are. Mellie turns to look. It is Marge, the woman Helen called a creature.

Even Mellie knows that on the island it is considered crass to speak so baldly. For the first time ever, being home, she laughs out loud.

Mellie follows Helen's car only as far as the first turn at High Bank. Then she meanders, arriving back at her own place after a dreamy hour, as if by accident, or instinct. She unlocks her door, sits at her kitchen table with her sandals on—does not even bother to put on water for tea—her mind still unrolling scenes, like footage, from the drive.

I do know this place, she thinks, cruising the coastline in her mind, in simple thrall to the landscape. I know it: the cloud-scudded sky; the mild fields; the sweetly undulating land, every precise plot linked up and criss-crossed by roads like the network of knots in a tatted cloth; the sea.

A shingle fly buzzes against her closed kitchen window, and Mellie looks up in dismay. Of course there was more. Things she didn't want to see: hillsides stripped-bare, logging trucks commandeering the narrow roads. And what she knows from reading *The Guardian*: entire, poisoned rivers closed off, the fish in them dying too fast to catch.

Mellie cannot forget for more than a moment: this is no memory set; it is a real, flawed and changing island.

The next morning, so early only the farmers are up, Mellie drives to the shore.

In the mellow light of morning, the vast expanse of the ocean catches her by surprise. *Listen*. In the murmuring waves you can hear a brief, sear song. She hears, she almost hears

This is what she imagines she can hear: the island's censure. Except of course she cannot hear.

It is cool enough for a sweater on the beach, but the air is soothing—soft and clingy, like an old slip. She walks and walks for miles, sandpipers streaming down the shoreline ahead of her, little avian escorts. The birds bob and weave through the tidal dross. They rise, eerily, as a single body, then swoop off over the water, only to circle back a few seconds later, setting down a little further along the shore. They do this over and over again. Silly birds! Their comic, constant, bobbing dance is a joy—but when they rise and swing suddenly away, their leaving prompts in Mellie an immediate and profound feeling of loss. On this cloudy day at the beach, the light is like a cracked porcelain bowl filled with warm water. Sound is fragmented, more than a little blurred.

She walks in the water. She can feel the slap of the surf, the pull of the tide. She can feel the waves play.