

All Things Loud and Electrical

We liked the house we lived in when we took care of a ranch in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon, though it had no electricity nor any other modern conveniences. Cold winter wind leaked into the ramshackle house that had been moved from down by the abandoned mill sometime in the 1930s. We roofed the house with metal roofing and made other improvements over the eight and a half years we lived and worked there.

That job ended, and we accepted a job taking care of the water intakes, at 5,000 feet on the east slope of Tumalo Mountain, for the city of Bend, in central Oregon. The city provided us a house, with electricity, running water, refrigerator, freezer, washer, dryer, electric heat, and a telephone, all new to us but welcome enough, though I had to work to adjust to modernity.

Every night when I drifted into sleep, the refrigerator clicked on and rumbled and hummed, and I jumped wide awake. The refrigerator shut up, finally, and I drifted back into sleep. The electric furnace in the basement clicked on, and the fan, bolted to the floor joists of the house, rumbled warm air into the upstairs and vibrated the whole house, and I jolted awake again.

I knew the machines in the house had operated well for years without anyone staying awake to monitor them. I knew two smoke alarms upstairs and one in the basement, where our daughters' bedrooms were, all worked. But what I felt about the sounds and machines around me didn't answer to reason.

During our eight and a half years in an electricityless house, I cleaned flues, made sure no chimney was too close to flammable material, put reflectors between stoves and walls, and monitored every potential source of fire. We had escape plans in case a fire did start, and we had supplies ready in case we had to survive a very cold night after a house fire.

In our modern house, I wasn't willing to turn the management over to machines. Electricity and all the machines that run from it are awfully new. Could I be sure they were safe and effective?

But it wasn't only the potential for danger and distrusting the machines that managed our environment that kept me awake. I found it hard to live with the noise the machinery of the house made. How do people in cities sleep with the sounds of their own houses and all the noises around their houses? At least, our nearest neighbor was more than three miles away, and so was most traffic.

For my health and sanity, I needed sleep. I worked hard to learn to accept the sounds the house made. At last, I was ready. The smoke alarms worked, and we had a good fire-escape plan. I had checked all the wiring and all the appliances, and they were in good condition. I was ready to let the machines take care of the house, with all their rumbling, humming and vibrating. Any unusual sound, symptomatic of something going wrong, would wake me. And our dog was on duty. He would bark if anything unusual happened.

I drifted peacefully to sleep. And the phone rang. I jumped out of bed, thundered down the stairs, lifted the receiver, and spoke. A woman said, "There's a June Bolen or Bowen out front. What do you know about that?" I faced the clock. It said 12:45, an hour and a half from when I went to sleep.

I said, "Out front of what?"

"Isn't this the police department?"

"No, it isn't" She hung up. I wanted to know more about June Bolen or Bowen and what she was out front of. I looked up the police department in the phone book, and the number wasn't similar to ours. It took me a long time to go back to sleep. I had again become very sensitive to the mechanical noises around me.

The next night at one a.m., the phone rang. When I snatched the receiver up into the darkest hours of the night and barked a greeting, "HELLO?" into it, a different woman said either, "I'm trying to contact Bob at the place he works," or "I'm trying to contact the department of public works."

I said, "WHAT?"

She said, "I think I'll try a different number," and hung up.

I wanted to tell her, "I wasn't yelling in anger, exactly. This phone line sometimes doesn't give a very good connection, and I hoped to get you to speak up," but it was too late.

I couldn't put a shut-off switch on the phone, because my employers had to be able to contact me at any hour if problems developed with the water intakes. I couldn't revise the house into a quieter structure and system of machines, because its owners, my employers, thought it was good the way it was, and they didn't want me messing with it.

In reality, I told myself, it is coincidence that people misdialed when I was having trouble sleeping. I don't really think there is a conspiracy to destroy my sleep and my sanity. Whoever bolted the heater fan to the floor joists was probably not gleefully looking forward to the day when I, a very light sleeper, moved in and began to suffer.

I liked the modern house. We didn't have to buy batteries every two weeks for the radio and tape deck. We got an f.m. station, with classical music, which we appreciated. We had all the light we needed for anything we wanted to do. It was easier to take care of our needs than it had been in Whitney Valley, so I had more time to write and to play my guitar and sing.

I knew I wouldn't actually enjoy being a hermit. My wife and daughters loved the place, and I intended to stay with them. I went back to bed, and it didn't take me long to go to sleep, because I was exhausted.

I rarely received a wrongly-dialed call in the middle of the night after that, and I usually slept well. The house was well insulated, and my wife and I slept in the loft, that stayed warm, even on a sub-zero night. I moved our bed close to the window, and we slept with the window open.

Natural sounds, the waterfall behind the house, and the sounds of wildlife, coyotes, owls, and deer knit my nights together, and soothed my dreams.