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Screaming (Literature)

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Rosemary could not scream. Not that there was any immediate reason why she should be screaming. She wasn't in any danger. She wasn't frightened. In fact, she was washing dishes, which certainly made her want to scream, but it wasn't your average goose-flesh causing, hair-on-end, breath-quickening situation. The fact was, she decided, she didn't have the vital part of the body necessary to produce a really blood-curdling scream. Was there such a thing as a scream bone? A scream muscle? Whatever it took, Rosemary decided she didn't have it. All she could produce was a sort of "Yuuuuuh!" in a tight unkeyed monotone.

Rosemary couldn't understand why life had cheated her so singularly. Her mother could scream. She could emit sounds reminiscent of a Wagnerian heroine at the blink of an eye. Her father had cauliflower ears like an old boxer from the steady assault of sound. He sometimes had a slightly punch-drunk look in his eyes too, like he heard bells where no bells were. Rosemary knew, though, that it wasn't bells her father heard. It was screaming.

Melody, her sister, could scream like a firetruck. She had been born screaming and had hardly stopped in all the years since. Any excitement was enough to send her voice ascending the scale to pitches past the human ear's ability to hear. She had quite a following among the dogs of the neighborhood though.

"I will learn to scream!" Rosemary told herself with feeling. "I am a reasonably intelligent, fairly competent woman, and if life has shortchanged me, it is up to me to do something about it! If I had been born with only one arm, I wouldn't have waited this long to have a prosthesis made! If my vision were poor, I would certainly have glasses made to help me see! Having a scream is no different. I'll do it!"

Rosemary looked through the Yellow Pages in vain for Screaming Aids, Screaming Teachers, Help for the Screaming Impaired, Screamers' Anonymous, Screams for Rent. There was nothing. Could it be that no one was concerned with those poor underprivileged souls who were unable to produce even a peep of a scream?

Rosemary's husband, Gordon, was sympathetic, and offered consoling clucks and understanding pats on the forehead. Rosemary **hated** to be patted on the forehead. Gordon assured Rosemary that her deficiency (as she was beginning to think of it) didn't matter to him at all. "I didn't marry a coloratura. So what? You'll never have to scream as long as I'm around."

That sounded good. In theory. But in practice it was another story. The day when another car dashed heedlessly across three lanes of traffic and forced Rosemary and Gordon off the road, all she could do was clutch the seat with her fingernails and rumble like an orgasmic cow: "Oopf! Oopf! Oopf!" Gordon had to admit that, somehow, it would have been more psyche-satisfying to have heard a shriek of panic. Panic, Rosemary had. Shriek, she had not.

SCREAMING

Myralin Trayer
Short Story
Second Place

. . . she didn't have the vital part of the body necessary to produce a really blood-curdling scream.

SCREAMING (continued)

The next week when Rosemary found herself jammed in the front seat of the car between her mother and Melody on their way to a bridge game, she became intensely aware of how different she was from the other two. Her mother and sister had twin red heads of high-piled jiggling curls which bounced like metronomes marking the tempo of their two-of-a-kind larger-than-life voices. Their bodies were matched dumplings of soft pink flesh, and even their choice of clothes ran to the same silky flowing gowns that made them appear to float several inches above the ground. No red curls for Rosemary. Plain straight brown hair hung down on her skinny neck. Her small-bosomed, thin body made her feel like a dun colored wren perched between two magnificent cardinals. Then there was the matter of her voice. No dulcet tones. No heroic volume. No screams.

Rosemary's neck ached from turning from first one to the other as their conversation played around her. It was like listening to a tennis match. Near the presto movement of their bravura discussion, Rosemary heard one sentence separate itself from the others. Melody was speaking:

"I have decided to give Celeste voice lessons. She is ten now, and old enough to . . ."

Voice lessons! Of course! That could be the answer for her too. Surely once she had learned to use her voice to achieve those liquid golden tones in lilting melody she could reproduce those same sounds in heartfelt screams.

"I've been thinking about voice lessons too," she inched herself into the conversation for the first time.

"Voice lessons? Really? You? Why? I mean, at your age!" Her mother arched her neck to one side and peered at her as if she didn't recognize this strange person who impersonated her daughter.

Rosemary felt several more years settle themselves upon her shoulders. "What do you mean, at my age? Besides, it's not my age that's at issue. It's my voice."

"I can't think why you would want to take voice lessons either," chimed in Melody, her voice rising to claim the attention of the neighborhood. "Why, my Gerald was just saying the other day that he believed every woman should take up estate planning as a sideline. But voice? Everyone has a voice. Just use what you've got!"

"Don't be silly, Melody!" caroled Rosemary's mother as her voice climbed the octave so that its timbre peaked over Melody's volume. "Rosemary isn't interested in estate planning. What is estate planning anyway? Sounds like you are planning your poor husband's demise or something. French cooking lessons are the thing for our Rosemary."

"Mama, I know your generation thinks anything to do with being a better wife and homemaker is good for all women, but I happen to know—Gerald told me himself—that if a woman is smart today, she will . . ."

SCREAMING (continued)

"Melody, will you keep Gerald out of this argument? This is just for the women of the family, and, heaven knows, Gerald isn't even in the family if you get right down to it . . ."

Rosemary leaned back into the thick upholstery of the car and released her mind from the captivity of voices while the splendidly noisy verbiage flowed around her. She imagined the words taking form and piling up in the car around them. Soon their legs and feet were covered with words, then their bodies, and finally all that could be seen were two red heads, curls shaking and reverberating to the sympathetic sound waves that bounced around the car. They seemed unaware of the crush of words, unaware of Rosemary's silence; and, for the rest of the ride, continued to spar in elegant counterpoint.

Rosemary began her voice lessons with Madame Maria Frelinghuysen that very week. She spent the first lesson repeating scales and arpeggios sung first by the piano, then by Madame Frelinghuysen. Rosemary lent her whole mind and throat to the task, and felt that she carried it off fairly successfully until Madame Frelinghuysen told her that she was too tense, too tight.

"It's all in the loose throat, my dear," she informed Rosemary with somber nods of her aristocratic head. "Loosen! Loosen!"

Rosemary loosened and loosened. She felt so loose that her knees couldn't agree which one would bear her weight at the moment, so neither of them did, and she sat down suddenly on a small stool in front of the piano.

"Up! Up!" commanded the venerable Madame. "Bend over from the waist, like so. Let the arms and shoulders droop forward. Shake the head back and forth to free up the muscles in the neck and shoulders." She demonstrated the posture with such energy that Rosemary giggled in spite of herself. Madame looked like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. Rosemary cleared her throat and quickly assumed the position. She shook her head and dangled her arms with dedication. She felt decidedly loose.

"This week one must practice, practice, practice! To achieve the tonal quality, one must open the throat. Relax the muscles. Don't forget!" Madame Frelinghuysen made it sound like a matter of national security that she not forget to practice her scales.

Rosemary practiced her scales the next morning while she drove the kindergarten carpool. She felt pretty good about the sounds she was beginning to produce. When they reached the school, Rob, her five-year-old son, lingered behind the other four kids when they scrambled from the car. When they were out of sight he implored earnestly. "Mom, would you not make those noises in the car with my friends anymore? They think you're wacko." Rob gave her a quick hug and started to leave the car. As a second thought he looked back at her and asked, "Is it your sinuses again?" and ran into the school without waiting to hear her reply.

To achieve the tonal quality, one must open the throat. Relax the muscles.

That afternoon Rosemary was a leader for a nature walk with the Brownie troop of which her eight-year-old daughter, Anabel, was a member. The freedom and openness of the woods seemed like an ideal place to practice her vocal exercises. Since Rosemary was basically a rather shy person, she tried to hum the scales quietly under her breath, but the inattentive chatter of the girls gave her heart, and soon, to her amazement, she heard herself answering the songs of the birds with scales and trills of her own. Just as she felt she was really getting some heart into the thing, Mildred Forbisher, the other leader of the troop, asked her to wait until they were off the trail to yodel because the noise was scaring the birds and squirrels away. After all, that was what they wanted the girls to see, wasn't it?

Practicing at home was no better. The dog howled dismally, and the cat laid his ears back until he looked like an angered wasp and fled hastily from the room. Once her struggling scales caused a soufflé to fall. It was not a good week for Rosemary.

When she had her next lesson, Madame Frelinghuysen announced to the world at large that Rosemary had been a slacker about her practicing. "Unless we practice, even Madame cannot help one. One should save one's money and buy instead a wok. It would do one more good."

Rosemary left the studio in humiliation. She needed bolstering up. She needed approval. She needed pity. She needed . . . Mama!

When she arrived at the address the apartment was so silent that Rosemary checked the number on the doorframe to see if she had made a mistake. No mistake, that was it. But **quiet**. She let herself into the apartment and stood for a moment just looking. It seemed that the absence of sound changed the physical appearance of the room also. Edges of furniture seemed to stand out in clear relief against definite colored walls and carpets. Walls, corners, windows and doors were crisp in their right angle assignments. The room seemed airless, almost a vacuum, without the tide of sound that was its normal decoration.

Just as Rosemary was about to leave she heard a small gurgling sound from the direction of the bedroom. She hurried down the hall. Another sound, similar to the first, caught her ear. The bedroom was empty; there was just her father lying across the queen sized bed reading an old copy of Gentleman Farmer.

Just then Mama emerged from the bathroom trailing a mauve silk peignoir behind her. One plump pink hand was clasped at her breast as if she were about to declaim in grandiloquent manner. With the other hand she patted the air in Rosemary's direction as if to calm the gathering storm of worry she could see in her daughter's eyes.

"Mama, are you okay? What's the matter? Why aren't you talking to me?"

Rosemary's mother mouthed a single word, "Laryngitis," but there

It seemed that the absence of sound changed the physical appearance of the room also.

SCREAMING (continued)

was no sound to accompany it.

"Laryngitis!" exclaimed Rosemary, and noticed that her own voice had assumed a whispery quality in sympathetic tonality. "Have you seen a doctor?"

Mama shook her head, and the red curls jiggled around her ears. She picked up a pad of paper and wrote a note to Rosemary. It said: "Must rest my voice for a few days. Gargling with hot salt water. Works every time."

"Oh," said a relieved Rosemary, and felt guilty for speaking. She felt like she should be writing notes back to her mother so she wouldn't feel so bad for not being able to speak. "Can I do anything to help?"

Her mother waved aside the offer and wrote her another note. "Have you talked to Melody?"

Rosemary shook her head.

Another note. Conversation took longer this way. "Gerald is moving the whole family to Tampa. The beast." (The word 'beast' had been underlined savagely.)

"Tampa! Why?" Rosemary was staggered. She couldn't imagine her mother without her alter ego, Melody. Nor Melody without her mother's staunch support. Rosemary wondered if her mother would love her more if Melody were in Tampa.

"Some silliness about his job," was the hastily written reply.

Rosemary's thoughts claimed her attention that evening as she performed her evening rituals. As soon as she could escape she went in the bathroom and gargled with hot salt water. Softly, softly she began to gargle her way up the scale. One more octave, and she could hear a bubbly pure soprano pitch that was the stuff of which real screams were made. The tone wasn't bad. Power was missing of course. And emotion. No scream worth its blood-curdle was without its emotion. She took another big mouthful of hot salt water and again pulled her voice up from the depths of her diaphragm. It seemed to soar above her in the fluorescent lighted bathroom. Just as it reached the edge of the glass-breaking range, she pushed her voice forth to produce the volume of a real, bona-fide scream. The tone began to slip. Before it was gone altogether she gave it one mighty thrust which should have produced a high keening siren of silver sound.

It didn't happen. She choked on the salt water. It erupted from her mouth in a stinging spout of salty fire, dripped from her chin, splattered on the wall and mirror, and ran burning from her nose. All voice had stopped with a hoarse "Ruughh!" No scream. No gargle. Just chokes and gasps and sniffs.

Rosemary wiped her teary eyes and streaming nose. She coughed and pushed her hair out of her eyes. Gordon opened the bathroom door. "Are you all right? I thought I heard you vomiting." He looked concerned.

"I'm okay," she assured him, but suddenly found that she was crying. "Oh Gordon, it's so terrible!" Without warning she heard words pouring from her mouth that she hadn't planned to put there. "Mama has laryngitis. **Laryngitis**, Gordon! I'm so miserable! Laryngitis! She can't scream or anything!"

"Scream?"

"Scream? I mean speak. She can't speak."

"I still don't understand. Your mother is sick, so you were vomiting for her? What's really the matter, Rosemary?"

"I can't scream either!" she wailed.

"You don't have laryngitis."

"I never could scream. **You** know."

"It doesn't matter." He patted her forehead. She hated to be patted on the forehead.

"Melody is moving to Tampa," she told him, listing her grievances.

"To Tampa, eh? Well, I knew Gerald wanted to get away."

"And Madame Frelinghuysen said I shouldn't waste me money—your money—on voice lessons."

"It's okay. I understand."

"But laryngitis, Gordon. Isn't it awful?"

"Come on, Rosemary, it's not like she has cancer or something. It's just laryngitis. She'll be over it in a day or so."

"She can't even talk!"

"Mama has laryngitis . . . She can't scream or anything!"

SCREAMING (continued)

"Your dad needs the rest. Do them both a world of good. Cheer up."

There was a timid knock on the bathroom door. Anabel peeped in shyly, an anxious look on her face. "Mama?"

Rosemary wiped her eyes. "Hi, Baby."

"You crying, Mama?"

"I just got choked, that's all."

"Were you trying to yodel again like Mrs. Forbisher said?"

"Yodel? Oh, **yodel**. Well, sort of. I was gargling."

"That's why you sounded so funny." Anabel nodded her small head and looked wise beyond her years. "Did you remember the cupcakes that I need for tomorrow?"

"CUPCAKES! I forgot! But don't worry, you'll have them in the morning." Rosemary sighed a small sigh. She had been so preoccupied with this screaming thing that she had forgotten her daughter's needs.

Just as she closed the oven door on the cupcakes she heard Rob start to cry in his room. Another nightmare? She hurried to his room where she found him sitting up in his bed, sobbing and rubbing his eyes.

"Robby? What's the matter, Robby? Oh, Robby! Not again! Did you forget to go to the bathroom before you got in bed again? Poor Robby." Rosemary began to pull the wet pajamas from her son's sleep-warm body. "You run to the bathroom now while I change your bed." It occurred to her that she was a living example of locking the stable after the horse had been stolen.

Rosemary put the sheets in the washer, took the cupcakes from the oven and began to think of bed herself.

Just then: "Rosemary, I don't have a shirt for tomorrow."

"Sure you do. I saw one in your closet." She turned a black look on him.

"I can't wear that one, Honey. It's the one your mother gave me—the one that is too tight in the collar. It cuts off the circulation to my brain."

"Gordon . . .!" Rosemary's voice inched upward in exasperation, grew louder and bolder. "Then why don't you get rid of it? Cupcakes and wet beds and shirts that don't fit are too much . . ."

Suddenly she stopped. That had sounded like something Mama would say. Sort of. She tried again: "Ironing shirts is not what I . . ."

No use. It was gone. Her voice sounded quiet and conversational. Not piercing. "Never mind." She sighed in defeat. "I'll iron one for you as soon as I've iced Anabel's cupcakes."

It was quite late. Rosemary wondered why she didn't feel more tired. She smiled at Gordon, across the room, ironing his own shirt for the next day, as she applied thick pink icing to the cupcakes. The washer tumbled and sounded like it was saying over and over, "Warm and full, warm and

full, warm and full."

"You're so understanding and helpful!" she told him with real feeling in her voice.

"Moms have no monopoly on helpfulness, you know. Besides, I wanted to talk to you. This business about screaming . . ."

"Why do you suppose I can't?"

"I don't know. Maybe you really can. But why should you? Do you want to scream at the children? At me?"

"No, of course not!" She waved the thought aside impatiently. "But suppose . . . well, suppose someone broke in the house . . ."

"I'd protect you."

"No, now wait," Rosemary insisted, "this is my suppose. Someone broke in, and you weren't here. I could scream for help."

"Use the telephone. It's surer."

"Gordon! Be reasonable!"

"The telephone is unreasonable?"

"Gordon, stop! Maybe I could scare him away with a scream."

"Get a burglar alarm. Now there's a sound that would frighten your intruder away."

Suddenly Gordon set the iron down and snapped his fingers. "Hey! Got a terrific idea! Be right back. Don't go away!"

"What . . .?" Rosemary started, but she was talking to an empty room. She could hear him rummaging through the junk closet. When he returned he was smiling triumphantly, like a little boy on Christmas morning.

"Here you are. This is Rosemary's scream. Guaranteed louder, higher, sharper, better than anything your mother or sister could ever scream!" He reverently hung a braided plastic thong around her neck and showed her the shiny silver whistle which was attached. "Boy Scout!" he told her proudly. "Just blow, and listen to that beautiful sound!"

Rosemary looked at her husband in open-mouthed disbelief. This whole day had just been too much! How could he be so logical? How could he think that she . . .? Rosemary could have screamed. If she could have screamed.

She looked at Gordon, eye to eye, solemnly, and raised the whistle to her lips. □

"This is Rosemary's scream. Guaranteed louder, higher, sharper, better than anything your mother or sister could ever scream!"
