

BACKGROUND NOISE

When her husband died, Laura discovered that a house can go on functioning after losing the person around whom, without anyone ever quite noticing, it had arranged every one of its small habits for thirty-two years.

The refrigerator switched itself on and off with the same regularity; at six forty the boiler began sending hot water through the radiators, according to the schedule Carlo had set years earlier, when he still took a certain pleasure in the idea that even domestic heating could be made rational; and at seven ten the coffee machine gave two short beeps, ground the beans and slowly began filling the kitchen with that bitter smell which, for decades, had announced the beginning of the day.

Laura hardly drank coffee anymore, yet for several weeks she let the machine continue making it. On the first morning after the funeral she had woken before the alarm, walked into the kitchen while it was still dark and, without thinking, taken two cups from the cupboard: the plain white one Carlo used and the one decorated with small lemons that she had bought on a holiday on the Amalfi Coast. She placed them both under the spout and only when the coffee began to fall did she realise what she was doing.

She remained there for a few seconds watching the liquid fill the two cups with identical precision, then took the white one, poured it down the sink and washed it immediately, as though there might be something indecent in allowing coffee intended for a dead man to remain there even for a few minutes.

In the months that followed, grief presented itself to her mainly in this form, through the humiliation of small practical mistakes which proved that some part of her brain had still not been properly informed of Carlo's death. She bought six yoghurts instead of three, left the right-hand side of the bed free, put jars of green olives into the supermarket trolley even though she had never liked them and Carlo had loved them, only noticing at the checkout, when the jar rolled along the conveyor belt between the detergent and the pasta and she found herself wondering who she had bought them for.

She would even sometimes leave school, take out her phone with the intention of writing that she would be home late, and stop at exactly the same point, when her finger had already opened their conversation and the screen displayed the last message he had sent her, a perfectly ordinary *Pick up some bread if you pass the bakery*, which Laura had never had the courage either to delete or to move into the archived chats.

She had never been a particularly indulgent woman where other people's small habits were concerned, and during their marriage she had spent a surprising amount of time asking Carlo to make less noise. In the mornings he opened the kitchen cupboards as if he needed to test the hinges for strength each time, dropped the teaspoon into the cup instead of setting it down, dragged his slippers along the corridor and, whenever he came home in the evening, let his bunch of keys fall into a ceramic dish with a clatter Laura could hear even from the bedroom.

"Is it really necessary to slam everything?"

"I don't slam anything."

"I can hear your keys from upstairs."

"At least you know I'm home."

"I'd know even if you put them down properly."

"It wouldn't be the same."

Laura had always reproached him for that answer, which seemed to her one of the many foolish ways Carlo managed to defend any defect, using a little irony to turn it into a personal characteristic that everyone else was expected to accept.

Four months after his death, she could still feel irritated when she thought about it.

Or at least that was what she told herself.

She was fifty-nine when Francesca, her daughter, first told her about a program capable of restoring the family's old recordings.

"It's not one of those things that makes dead people talk, is it?" Laura asked, in a tone that was meant to sound ironic but betrayed an immediate wariness.

Francesca smiled, not because the question amused her, but because she knew her mother well enough to have expected exactly that reaction.

"No, Mum."

"Because I'm not interested."

"I know."

"And I don't want those photographs that move either. Your aunt sent me one of Dad when he was young, turning his head and smiling. It unsettled me."

"It's not that."

They were sitting in the kitchen with a drawer open in front of them, a drawer in which Laura had spent years accumulating cables that no longer led to any existing device, chargers belonging to phones thrown away long ago, adaptors, tangled earphones, a rectangular battery still in its packaging and a small grey digital recorder Francesca had found a few days earlier while clearing out her father's study.

Carlo had recorded almost everything, not because he was particularly nostalgic for the present, nor because he attributed to memory a sentimental value greater than other people did, but simply because he liked devices. In the nineties he had bought an enormous video camera that had to be balanced on the shoulder, then a smaller one, then a digital camera, then increasingly sophisticated phones; he had converted old tapes into files, files into newer formats, made copies of photographs nobody had ever asked him to preserve, and organised folders with precise names, almost always beginning with a date which, according to him, would allow anyone to find anything.

Laura had been annoyed by that obsession all her life.

"Do you really have to film everything?" she would ask.

Carlo would lower the camera for a few seconds.

"One day you'll be glad I did."

"One day I won't care in the slightest about watching myself cut a cake."

"You won't. I will."

"Then look at me instead of the camera."

Carlo would laugh and start filming again.

Now the hard drive recovered from his study contained almost thirty years of material: birthdays, Sunday lunches, holidays, school performances, Christmases, afternoons in the garden, dinners during which absolutely nothing had happened, an astonishing quantity of ordinary life preserved with a care that had once seemed ridiculous and which now seemed, at least to Laura, like a form of foresight both moving and almost cruel.

The problem was that much of the older material sounded terrible.

"This program can clean up the audio," Francesca explained. "It removes wind, tape hiss, separates the voices. We can try it."

Laura looked at the little recorder and then at the computer screen.

"Would your father's voice sound better?"

"Much better, I think."

She did not answer at once. Instead she began rummaging through the drawer, searching among the cables for one that might belong to the recorder, although Francesca had already told her they did not need it. This was how she postponed decisions whenever one frightened her: she delayed choosing by occupying herself with something concrete and, if possible, useless.

"Let's try."

The first recording was from the summer of 1998.

Francesca was five and was running back and forth across a garden Laura recognised only when she noticed, in the background, a small wooden house painted green. They had spent a week at an agriturismo near Volterra, but she remembered almost nothing about that holiday. She could recall the previous summer, which they had spent by a lake, and the one after that, when they had gone to Puglia, with surprising precision, while 1998 seemed to have

settled in her mind in the form of a few isolated fragments: a white road, an orange dress bought at a market, Carlo with sunburn on his neck.

The original audio was almost unusable. The wind overwhelmed the microphone and the words reached them distorted, as though spoken by people standing behind glass.

Francesca uploaded the file.

A few categories appeared on the right-hand side of the screen.

VOICE

CHILD

ENVIRONMENT

The system worked for less than a minute.

When they played the result, Carlo's voice arrived suddenly clear.

"Fra, don't run there, you'll fall."

Laura stiffened.

It was not the first time she had heard her husband's voice since he died. She had listened to his old voice messages until she knew some of them by heart and, on the worst nights, had even called his number simply to hear the voicemail greeting, although the recorded voice said an ordinary sentence Carlo had once spoken without any intention of leaving it behind as an inheritance.

But this time it was different, because the voice had an almost physical closeness, stripped of the hiss that had kept it at a distance in time.

Carlo laughed in the recording, said something about the owner's dog, called Francesca again and asked Laura whether she had put on sunscreen.

The recording ended.

"It's incredible," Laura said.

Francesca smiled, pleased.

"We can do it with all of them."

They restored four that evening, and over the following days Laura learned to use the program by herself. After dinner she sat at the computer, chose a recording and waited for the system to recognise Carlo's voice automatically. On the desktop she had created a folder called CLEAN CARLO, a name which at first had seemed merely practical and which, the more often she saw it, began to trouble her in a way she could not quite define, as though the adjective contained a judgement she had never intended to make.

Inside that folder Carlo went on speaking at every age. There was young Carlo, thin and still with all his hair; Carlo in his forties, complaining that nobody was helping him load the car; Carlo in 2007 maintaining with complete confidence that satellite navigation would make road maps disappear; Carlo singing badly during a journey; Carlo calling Francesca back; Carlo asking somebody to pass the bread.

At first Laura searched mainly for the important things he had said, as though grief needed proof that this man had truly loved her and that somewhere there ought to exist evidence clear enough to preserve.

In one video recorded on their twenty-fifth anniversary Carlo told her she was beautiful. In another, during dinner with friends, he told the story of their first meeting for the hundredth time and claimed, against all evidence, that he had fallen in love immediately.

Laura extracted those fragments and saved them separately.

Then, as the days passed, they interested her less and less.

It seemed strange to discover how little the man who said the things that, by any reasonable standard, deserved to be remembered resembled her husband. That was a Carlo conscious of speaking in front of other people, sometimes even in front of a camera, and therefore already, to some degree, posing; the Carlo whom Laura recognised without hesitation appeared instead in the moments to which nobody would have thought to pay attention.

"Have you seen the keys?"

"Who finished the milk?"

"Fra, turn that light off."

"Laura, did you lock the car?"

One evening she spent almost ten minutes listening to a recording in which Carlo was trying to assemble a bookcase.

The camera had been left on the table and showed half the sitting room and a doorway; Carlo was out of frame, but there was the sound of wood striking the floor, instructions rustling and the occasional curse spoken quietly enough to be denied later.

"There's a screw missing."

From the kitchen, Laura answered:

"Look in the bag."

"I have."

"Look properly."

Several seconds passed.

"Found it."

"Funny."

"It was underneath."

"Of course."

Laura laughed.

She laughed, genuinely laughed, alone in front of the computer, and immediately afterwards raised a hand to her mouth, almost as surprised as she would have been to hear somebody else laughing in the room.

From that evening on she searched less and less for declarations and more and more for those fragments in which Carlo had nothing to say. She could not have explained why a man asking where the keys were seemed more like her husband than the man promising in front of friends that he would marry her another hundred times, but she felt no need to find an answer. She simply continued looking for him wherever she thought she recognised him.

For several weeks she restored almost everything.

The wind disappeared, the electrical hum of old tapes was erased, traffic receded, plates no longer knocked against one another, televisions playing in nearby rooms fell silent. The voices remained clear and close, separated from the confusion in which they had originally been recorded.

To Laura it seemed a small and reasonable miracle.

The first crack appeared in a recording from Christmas 2004.

The video lasted almost fifty minutes and for most of that time showed nothing of interest, because Carlo had left the camera on top of a cabinet after filming Francesca opening her presents. The frame contained only part of the sofa, half a window and the lower branch of the Christmas tree.

Laura was about to close the file when she heard the front door.

Immediately afterwards came a few faint metallic knocks, almost insignificant.

She stopped the video.

Went back.

Listened again.

This time she recognised them.

They were Carlo's keys.

All his life he had carried an absurdly large bunch: the house keys, the cellar, the garage, the car, the office, an old key that had belonged to his parents' house and no longer opened anything, and a small metal keyring bought in

Munich on their honeymoon. Whenever he came home, the bunch struck first against the door and then against the hall cabinet, where Carlo dropped it into a ceramic dish.

Laura listened to the fragment again.

She remembered, with an irritation that had become almost affectionate, how often she had asked him to put the keys down instead of throwing them.

She uploaded the video into the program.

When the new track was ready, Carlo entered the sitting room and said, with perfect clarity:

"I'm home."

Laura waited.

Then she went back.

The voice was perfect.

The keys were gone.

She opened the track details.

TRANSIENT METALLIC SOUND
RELEVANCE TO PRIMARY AUDIO: LOW

ACTION: REMOVE

Laura stared at the final line and, without quite knowing why, restored the original sound.

The keys returned.

With them returned the refrigerator, somebody coughing, a car on the road, the television playing too loudly and the voice of Laura's mother-in-law complaining from somewhere out of frame that Francesca had eaten all the chocolates before lunch.

Laura listened until the end.

The following evening she opened another video.

Then another.

She restored nothing.

Instead she began comparing the originals with the processed versions and noticed that the program had removed a surprising number of things to which, until then, she had never had any reason to listen: the creak of the chair Carlo used in the kitchen, the sharp thud with which he closed the cupboard above the refrigerator, the way he dragged his slippers slightly along the corridor.

"Pick up your feet when you walk."

"I do."

"You drag them."

"It's the slippers."

"Slippers don't walk by themselves."

Listening to that step again, Laura tried dragging her own slippers in the same way.

It did not sound the same.

She tried again.

Still not.

It made her smile and immediately afterwards irritated her, because it seemed absurd that even such a stupid defect should have had its own private way of existing.

From then on she began listening to what the program had discarded.

A teaspoon against a cup.

A zip.

A door.

A cough.

The chair.

The keys.

None of those sounds had anything to say. They really were noise, and once removed, the conversations became easier to understand.

The program was doing its job properly.

One night she came to a video filmed during a holiday by the sea. She could not remember who had left the camera running, perhaps Francesca, but the frame showed only a terrace and a piece of sky. Carlo must have been sitting very close to the microphone, because beneath the voices coming from inside the house, his breathing could be heard.

In the restored version it was gone.

Laura opened the details.

BREATHING NOISE

RELEVANCE: NONE

She remained looking at those two words for several seconds.

Then she restored the track.

Turned up the volume.

Carlo was breathing.

Laura rested an elbow on the table and leaned towards the screen, although there was nothing there to see. At first the rhythm was regular, almost imperceptible; then one exhalation lengthened, followed by two shorter ones, a pause, a swallow. A few minutes later came a faint whistle through the nose, thin and slightly ridiculous, the sound Carlo always made when he was about to fall asleep and which, for years, had prompted Laura to touch his shoulder in bed so that he would change position before he started snoring.

Laura stopped breathing for a few seconds, as if silence on her part might allow her to hear him better.

The whistle came again.

And again.

There was no longer any doubt: Carlo had fallen asleep in the chair.

Laura remained there listening to him.

The video lasted eleven minutes and for almost all of it her husband did not say a word. There was his breathing, the wind moving something on the terrace, a motorbike in the distance, Francesca calling someone from inside the house; every now and then Carlo swallowed or shifted slightly and the chair answered with a brief creak.

When the track ended, Laura started it again.

The second time she only reached the first whistle.

Then she turned the volume down.

She remained seated with one hand on the table, looking at the still image of the terrace, that unimportant piece of sky somebody had accidentally recorded many years before.

It was already late at night. There was almost no sound in the house except the refrigerator motor starting at intervals and, from the floor above, a few footsteps.

Only then did Laura realise that her face was wet.

She did not wipe it immediately.

She stayed at the computer a little longer, then closed the video and opened another.

At around four in the morning she returned to the recording from the agriturismo near Volterra, the one with which everything had begun.

First she played the restored version.

"Fra, don't run there, you'll fall."

Carlo's voice was clear.

Then she opened the original.

The wind covered almost everything, Francesca shouted in the distance, a dog barked and Carlo said something Laura could not understand.

She listened again.

The white road of the agriturismo suddenly returned to her with a precision it had not possessed when she first watched the video; she remembered the orange dress bought at the market, Carlo asleep on a deckchair the previous day and the red patch on his neck because, despite her insistence, he had refused to put on sunscreen. She remembered that they had eaten out that evening, that Francesca had knocked over a glass of water, and that every night a ginger cat slept outside their room, a cat Carlo had quite improperly named Napoleon.

She kept listening until the end.

The next morning Francesca arrived and found her still at the computer, her hair flattened on one side and her eyes swollen.

"Mum, have you been here all night?"

"Nearly."

Francesca pointed at the screen.

"Have you finished?"

Laura shook her head.

"I don't think I'm going to clean them up anymore."

"Why?"

Laura thought for a few seconds.

"I like them like this."

Francesca looked at the video.

"With all that hiss?"

"Yes."

She added nothing else.

She opened the Christmas 2004 recording.

"Listen."

They remained silent.

From the computer came several muddled voices, the television, the front door.

Then the keys.

Francesca smiled almost immediately.

"Dad."

Laura turned towards her.

"You remember them?"

"Of course. I could hear them from my room."

For some reason, the answer relieved her. Over the last few days Laura had begun to think of those sounds as fragile things that only she would be able to recognise and which would therefore die with her; discovering that Francesca carried at least that small fragment without needing a recording felt reassuring.

"He made a terrible racket," Francesca added.

Laura laughed.

"I told him for thirty years."

The recording continued.

Carlo began arguing with his mother because she had bought too much ham.

Francesca laughed again.

"Grandad always said Dad ate like a refugee."

"He said all of you ate like refugees."

"Not you."

"I was the one who bought too much ham."

They listened for nearly half an hour.

By the time Francesca left, it was already after midday.

Laura walked her to the door and turned back towards the kitchen. Passing through the hall, she saw the wooden bowl in which she still left her own keys. Carlo's were no longer there; Francesca had taken them after the funeral, when the car had needed moving and some of his things clearing away.

For a moment Laura thought of asking her to bring them back.

She did not.

The program was still open on the computer. A window asked whether she wanted to apply automatic audio enhancement to the files that had not yet been processed.

Laura cancelled the operation and closed the window.

Then she went into the kitchen.

As she passed through the hall again, one of her keys, badly balanced on the rim of the wooden bowl, slid against the others and produced a small metallic knock.

Laura turned before she realised she had done so.

She remained still for several seconds, one hand resting on the doorframe.

The keys had fallen untidily across one another. Normally she would have straightened them.

This time she walked on.

From the kitchen came the sound of the refrigerator, upstairs somebody dragged a chair, outside a car slowed at the junction and, a moment later, came the thud of a car door closing.

Laura remained standing in the corridor for a little longer, listening.