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To Die of the Roar

By Gena Corea

Elspet wanted to lock President Nixon up with her collection for one painful day and that was, in fact, why she was locked up herself now.

One reason, anyway. Another was that, more and more, she lived on what George Eliot called "the other side of silence" and she was quite liable to die of the roar there.

Whenever she looked at her collection of newspaper clippings, the growl that was the precursor of the roar began rumbling in her stomach. Still, she kept working on the collection. Otherwise life would become chaotic.

Years ago, she'd put life in order by writing letters. After reading the newspaper she'd sit down at her typewriter, back straight, glasses perched on her nose. She'd type letters to the President, a radical Senator, a murderer, a priest perhaps, explaining very sensibly what could be done to straighten out the situations which had landed them in the news.

The letter-writing days passed; weeping binges replaced them. Those days she read and wept, read and wept. When the attacks of tears came, she could not talk for weeks.

For more than a year after that, she'd lived an ink-free, tear-free life. But then the pain began escaping through her lips when she was off-guard. It slipped out in half-whimpers. Quite embarrassing, on the subway, to have her pain publicly exposed.

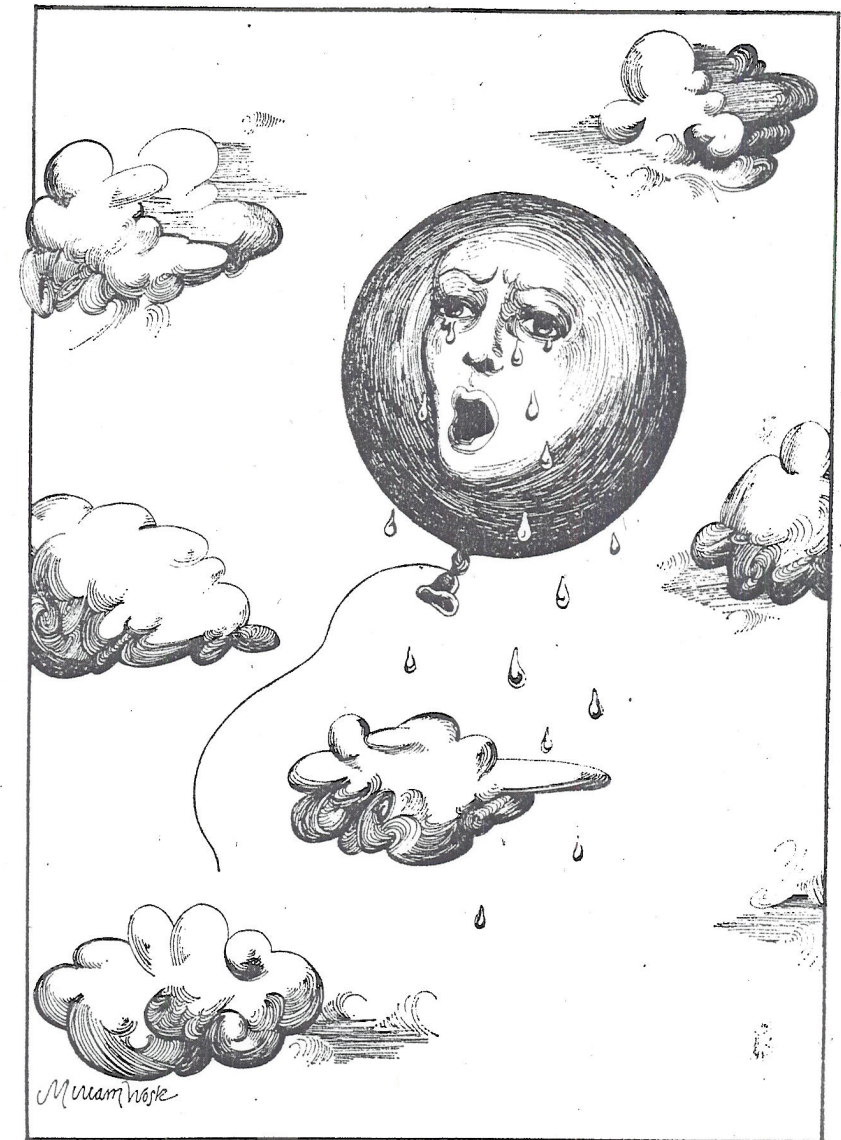
On those occasions, she'd glance around casually, trying to look natural so the other riders would think they'd been imagining things.

But the half-whimpers were only the barest tip of the pain-iceberg, she knew, and some day the whole iceberg would arise and roar and then, God help the citizenry. All the pain would burst through in one ear-splitting roar and people would have to clutch at telephone poles and traffic lights and hold on tight for her hurricane-iceberg pain might well bring the city down.

Well, here she was—so harmless to naive eyes—sitting on the floor surrounded by her collection. She'd ended up in the psychiatric hospital after confiding to a fellow bus passenger that she wanted to lock President Nixon up with her clippings. He'd reported her to the F.B.I. Quite properly too—her being a threat to the national isolation from pain and all.

This day Elspet had found the clipping that gave meaning to all the others. She holds it in her right hand, alternatively reading it and articles from the floor. The clipping is an interview with Mr. Nixon on his job:

"I never watch TV commentators on the news shows when they are about me. That's because I don't want decisions influenced by personal emotional reactions. . . . When I walk into this office I am cool and calm. I read the news summary (prepared



by the staff) and get both sides. That's important because there are so many emotional issues these days, such as the war and busing and welfare. But I never allow myself to get emotional."

She picks up a clipping from the floor. NIXON REAFFIRMS ANTI-BUSING STAND.

From the late fifties Elspet remembers pictures of white mothers, faces distorted by hate, spitting at black children outside newly integrated schools. Nixon is "cool and calm," she knows, and he would stand righteously above such scenes while, in fact, creating the mood for them.

NIXON HELD LIKELY TO DROP PROGRAM ON MINORITY JOBS.

RAGE PERMEATES ALL FACETS OF LIFE IN THE SOUTH BRONX. Do Nixon's news summaries tell him about fire hydrants used as the water supply for thousands of people who live in unheated tenements, Elspet wonders. Do they tell him about wild dogs roaming rubble-laden streets, sometimes attacking people? Or, she wonders, would images of cold, frightened people contract his heart with pain and prevent him from making an "objective" decision on a bill providing means to help them?

BUDGET CHIEF AFFIRMS PLAN TO ABOLISH POVERTY OFFICE. Housing, health and manpower training programs will be cut, Elspet reads. She wants to force into Mr. Nixon's head images of what those cuts mean to specific people, people with names and histories. Why, she thinks, should neatly typed news summaries protect him from the pain he causes?

NIXON VETOES H.E.W. BILL: CITES 'RECKLESS' SPENDING.

RENEWED BOMBING ADDS \$1.1-BILLION TO WAR'S COST. The growl is building up in Elspet now as her eyes sweep over the year's headlines. She reaches for her picture collection and begins pairing photographs and tapping them together.

She holds the photo of a Vietnamese woman who has thrown herself to the ground on hearing artillery fire. The woman's head is bandaged; she clutches a family chicken and looks up in fright at a photo of Melvin Laird, grinning.

RAGE PERMEATES ELSPET. The growl—it is rolling like a snowball in her stomach.

MORATORIUM ON HOUSING SUBSIDY SPELLS HARDSHIP FOR THOU-

SANDS. Getting louder and louder while the iceberg inches up.

PRESIDENT SCORES 'WELFARE ETHIC'. Elspet remembers Maggie who has six children and lives in a housing project in a slum. Maggie, who has been deserted by her husband who couldn't find a job. Maggie who, as a nurse's aide, cannot make enough money to support her family. Maggie who has no one to care for her children while she works. Maggie who is on welfare and who, exhausted from her housework and her hospital work and humiliated by her social worker's questions, feels ashamed and guilty when Mr. Nixon talks of free-loaders.

Why couldn't Maggie's black husband find a job, Elspet wonders. Why couldn't Maggie find better-paying work?

U.S. INACTION SEEN ON MINORITY JOBS. "The Nixon Administration has reportedly all but abandoned efforts to force Federal contractors to hire more blacks, other minority group workers and women. . . ."

So the President deplures the "welfare ethic," Elspet mutters, picking up the next clipping.

276 WITH INCOMES OF OVER \$100,000 PAID NO FEDERAL TAX IN 1971, A STUDY SHOWS.

GRUMMAN GETS NAVY LOAN DESPITE ITS REFUSAL ON F-14.

LOCKHEED.

LOCKHEED.

LOCKHEED.

The attendants are in Elspet's room now, speaking to her. But she can't hear them; the roar is too loud.

ARMY ENDS MY LAI REVIEW.

NIXON, RESTATING OPPOSITION TO AMNESTY, STRESSES PUNISHMENT.

CHARGES AGAINST LAVELLE DISMISSED BY AIR FORCE.

BERRIGAN AND A NUN GET PRISON TERMS IN LETTER SMUGGLING.

What are they saying to her? What do they want her to do? Eat dinner? Brush her hair? Talk with them ("Is the theater really dead?")? Pretend everything is all right?

What are they saying? Can't they hear? Can't they hear the roar?

"That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency . . ."

RICHARDSON SEES CLEAR AUTHORITY TO BOMB CAMBODIA.

". . . has not yet wrought itself into coarse emotion . . ."

U.S. BOMBS TOWN IN LAOS.

"And perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it . . ."

NAPALMED GIRL RECOVERING IN SAIGON.

"If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat . . ."

NIXON OFFICIALLY NOMINATED FOR THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE.

". . . and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence."

"Elspet," the attendants are saying. "Elspet, get up."

Gena Corea is a writer and columnist.