

Quiet potatoes

for Karen Houle

I paid my therapist in potatoes. Potatoes seemed right, since he was always talking about them. Feel as safe as a potato, he'd say, or, inside your head it can be as quiet as two potatoes in bed.

The funny thing was, it made a kind of sense. When he said it, only when he said it. He had many clients and they all said the same thing. He made it quiet in their heads, safe and quiet like potatoes underground.

He always called them customers, not clients or patients, because he didn't have any qualifications and he could get into trouble for doing good without a license, as he put it. So the sign on his door just said "Peter Erde, noise management and general advice." And when word spread, people came.

His office was right downtown, on the ground floor at the crossing of two bus routes and across the road from a fire station. And very quiet. For the first month I thought it was so quiet because he was so calm, and that I was feeling some of the potatoes that would soon be mine. I said this to him and he just pointed to the far corner of the room. A little round gadget, the size of a pot, making a dull whoosh, a transparent hiss. You didn't hear it till you saw it. A white noise machine. The sound wasn't high or low or middle, but high and low and middle all at the same time. And it didn't change, every moment was the same, filling your ears with a mashed potato muffle. You didn't notice it but it blocked all the other stuff.

So that's how it works, I said. We just sit here and eventually that soft white filler seeps into our heads and muffles the whispers and echoes and groans.

It was more complicated than that. The noise in your head comes from inside, so the masking has to be inside. You have to think undifferentiated wide spectrum thoughts. I can help you, he said in the invulnerable therapist voice he had learned from his clients, but you'll have to find it for yourself. One of my customers found silence when she began an affair with a married man in San Francisco. She wouldn't have done it without my help. Now her head is so full of calculations about how they can meet and how to distract their spouses that she just doesn't notice the child shouting within her. I don't think she likes the guy, but the gain in peace of mind is worth it. Another customer married a woman with three senile dogs. Actually she only had one and he persuaded her to get the other two to keep it company, as if it would notice. Now all day he is wrapped up in the awareness of what waits at home: ruined carpets, veterinary emergencies, inexplicable howling. He used to hear the groans of the

starving and the screams of the massacred. But since he found the dogs he's oblivious to all that. As for you, just keep telling me things and sooner or later you'll find your way.

That was the last time I saw him, because I thought I'd never go back. I thought I'd seen through the whole therapy racket, offering us calm in the face of atrocity. I decided to leave the country for a while to get away from all the self-indulgent whining. Well, just for three months in fact. I signed up for June, July and August, to show villagers in Uzbekistan how to irrigate their crops. But before I left I planted a crop of my own. Potatoes. I planted enough of my yard that I'd have a nice load of physical distraction when I returned.

The Uzbeks knew more about irrigation than I ever would. It was boring and frustrating, and I was left with my whispering growling thoughts. There were immediate worries, too. We might be assassinated, or kidnapped. I couldn't sleep; during the day my concentration was interrupted by the noise of the fear wheels grinding. I tried to think of my peaceful life at home, but what came to mind were my potatoes, left all to themselves to grow underground. I thought of all the worms and insects that might eat them; I worked out the balance of rainfall and bright dry weather without which they could not develop. I thought about them more and more. And I heard the dangers around me less and less, though I could see them when I looked. After a while I stopped hearing the other noises too, the comments from people I once knew, the criticisms I made of myself. It was quieter than I had ever been.

In September I had to go home. Before I left I bought some potatoes and planted them. Mostly I cut them up and planted just the little seed eyes: that way you can get more potatoes in the end, but there are more things that can go wrong. So there is always a potato or two somewhere in my mind, well beneath the surface and invisible to my everyday business, but struggling to get bigger, against worms and insects and drought and soaking.

When I got home I dug my potatoes. They were fine. In my absence they had taken care of themselves and grown up firm and lumpy. There was also a bill from Peter Erde for "incomplete advice". I took most of the potatoes and put them in a bag, with a ribbon around it and his name on it and took them to his office. I didn't include a note. I figured the potatoes would speak for themselves.