

Brain Refrain

A man's musical hallucinations puzzle doctors and send him on a journey to prolong hope.

Violins filled my bathroom with a symphonic marriage of Bach and the band Procol Harum, yet I couldn't name the song. The razor jerked still in my hand as the left eye—only recently, inexplicably, narrower than its blue neighbor—reflected fear in the mirror. My brain was composing again, spontaneously, sending the loud string sounds outside, to my ears.

This bizarre incident, which occurred in August 2003, followed several in the previous year that concluded with blackouts or, as the doctors labeled them, episodes of "syncope." The first, one year earlier in the spring of 2002, had been a fall with no precipitating music. My head went through the drywall. Hazy memories remain of scrambling on the tiles, loudly uttering gibberish.

A brief hospital stay following this fall included a negative electrocardiogram (EKG), an

electrical recording of heart activity. Then an electroencephalogram (EEG), the first step in diagnosing seizure disorders and brain tumors, was also negative. Cardiology testing followed but revealed nothing. I was merely advised to rise more slowly from bed.

A year passed and my 2002 blackout was forgotten—an isolated event.

Bizarre, music-related episodes first began in May 2003. An inexplicable fixation on morning news music was followed by sudden fear and a blackout.

One week later, heading home to Oakland from a flea market, I listened to Garrison Keillor spin his folksy radio yarns. The low background music grabbed my concentration, but I felt uneasy and scanned the mirrors for a quick escape from the freeway. The music continued even after

I turned off the radio. Before I could exit 680, I passed out. According to the Good Samaritan beside me when I awakened, I had struck the concrete center divider at about the speed limit and my old Volvo sparked its way up the wall. She offered her orange juice as we awaited the Highway Patrol.

Three weeks later, my license was revoked. I had recently made the switch from holding down two jobs, as a consumer bankruptcy attorney and newspaper copy editor, to one job as a workers' compensation attorney. Not being able to drive meant I couldn't travel to take depositions, an important component of my work. These blackouts were becoming a nuisance and a source of anxiety to both me and my new employer.

I quickly adjusted to public transit and kept a mostly upbeat attitude about the changes in my life.

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