

Filtering Out

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Summary: The brain is a remarkable biological machine.

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Her voice, screaming, “Help, Superman!”

The sound of his chair, scraping backwards against the floor. The smell of stale coffee on the corner of his desk. The cool brush of the bullpen’s air conditioning passing over the hairs on his arm. The sight of Jimmy crossing towards Perry’s office; the scent of the freshly developed photo prints in his hands. The flavor of a speck of powdered sugar stuck to his left back molar. The sensation of his foot hitting the floor as he heads towards the door.

The sound of her heartbeat.

A secretary in the executive suites two floors above typing at approximately eighty-seven words per minute. A machine processing and stamping a steady flow of envelopes in the mailroom. Ralph unsuccessfully hitting on a recent hire, who attempts to quietly demonstrate her disinterest by playing with her wedding band. Perry softly humming “Jailhouse Rock” to himself while tapping his foot in time with the music in his head. Cat’s cloyingly floral perfume wafting through the steadily churning air. The sensation of the stairwell door closing behind him with a satisfying thud of security.

Her heartbeat.

The contrast of bright light hitting his retinas, contracting his pupils, which had expanded in the shadows of the darkened stairwell. The whirl of the creaking fan blades circling inside the air conditioning units located on the roof. The scent of oily tar, and the slight squish of his foot falling against the heated roof surface. His innate magnetoreception sensing that north is off his left flank.

Her heartbeat, its racing cadence located somewhere southeast of the Daily Planet building.

The stretch of his snug Spandex fabric pulling against his tense muscles as he springs into the air. The cacophony of traffic in the streets below: screeching tires, blaring horns, incessant car alarms. His sight piercing through buildings as he whizzes by; the recognition that lingering lead paint in the older sections of the city causes his enhanced vision’s failure. The texture of smog churning from the factories in the industrial section at the edge of Metropolis, swirling through the crisp air and offering only fractional resistance to his passage through the skies.

And her heartbeat, a beacon that thumps ever louder as he zeros in.

He registers the passage of time — the mere seconds it has taken to hear her scream, race away from their workplace, and search for where she has been hidden. He senses the tightness in his chest, the grip of fear that he will be a second too late. He feels a flood of adrenaline as he bursts through the concrete walls, knowing that for anyone else, flesh crashing against a solid surface would result in excruciating pain.

Her heartbeat, quickening in excitement, then calming in relief.

The rough texture of the twisted rope, its tension snapped with the yank of his hands. The angry cry of cowards as their

scheme falls apart. The warmth of her skin as he scoops her into his arms, and her relieved sigh, combined with the light pressure of her arm hooking around his neck. The pin-pricking of bullets ricocheting off his back as he flies away from the lair.

Her heartbeat, steady and sure and nestled close to his own.

The brain registers forty million bits of sensory information per second: ambient temperature, background sounds, visual distractions. It subconsciously filters out the irrelevant, leaving the conscious brain to process only eight thousand bits of information, sorting and analyzing the input from over twenty distinct senses. Repeated patterns are stored as additional synapses, making them easier to recall and draw on when necessary.

The noise of the newsroom, the chaos of the city — all of it fades away the instant he hears her initial plea. All is tuned out except for her comforting heartbeat, the sound he can recognize across space and time. But now that she’s safe, his adrenaline can abate, his fear can subside, and he can process the multitude of the world’s wonders once again.

THE END