

FICTION

Every morning at 8 a.m., Mrs. Bea White stopped by the doughnut shop on her way to the Cathedral.

She ordered a plain doughnut and tea with nothing in it. Regular enough to set a clock by, she waited six inches from the register, never moving further into the shop, or entertaining the notion of taking up a stool. While the waitress got her breakfast, Mrs. White counted out the exact cost of her purchase, 62 cents. Not once in five years had she broken a dollar bill.

ufactured. She sat far enough away from the altar to insure that the priest's words couldn't reach her. After Mass she waited for 10 minutes, in which time the priest would turn down the church lights on his way to the rectory. Then, dusting off the pew and the kneeler with a tissue, Mrs. White would leave. The janitor would say "Good day." Though physically capable,

Every Day Doughnuts

A preview of a novel by Patrice Adcroft

Reaching into the brown bag for her drink, she stood at the shelf which rode along the window, cut a small hole in the cap of the cup, retrieved the doughnut and paper napkin, and folded the brown sack into quarters. This went inside her purse. The doughnut sat atop the tea while she pushed on the door with her right hand. If someone offered to hold the door for her, Mrs. White looked right through the Samaritan, paused until they passed, and continued her routine.

She ate and drank during the remainder of her walk, sipping twice for every bite. Her meal lasted for three blocks. Stuffing the napkin, now marked with the faintest trace of lipstick, and the plastic lid into the cup, she dropped her waste into a blue and white trash can. On either side of the bin were advertisements for the Guild Studios, which sold religious articles.

Claiming the last aisle on the Blessed Virgin's side, the middle-aged woman set down her navy blue handbag, the most expensive purse that the local factory man-

she had barely spoken to anyone in five years, including her husband and son with whom she lived.

People generally spoke well of Mrs. White, describing her as a model wife and citizen.

*Audrey Voxx had been a telephone operator for 15 years. When she ordered her morning beverage and doughnut from the waitress, the sales manager always popped out, just to enjoy Audrey's voice. Since birth he'd been missing an outer ear (his inner ear functioned perfectly) and he believed this "defect" accounted for his perfect pitch. Audrey's words were round and warm, sounding as if they had passed through a reed. Every syllable was clear without being exaggerated. Her speech was so lovely that she'd done three radio commercials for the phone company and had been on a local version of *What's My Line*.*

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He placed two fingers
on his throat and asked
if she'd allow him to
touch her neck as she
spoke.



For a month now she'd been frequenting the shop; she began the ritual when she changed to night operator, a job that set her free at 7:30 each morning. The caffeine and sugar jolt kept her going. She preferred to stand (having sat all night) as the waitress fixed her order, but several times Audrey rested on a stool, particularly if the girls were busy, and talked with the sales manager. Inevitably, upon hearing the waves of her words lap at his ear, a trucker would ask Audrey to say his name.

"It's fine," she'd reply, laughing a bit with embarrassment. "It happens all the time."

She would talk about her job and the calls that had come in the dead of the night. Twice in one week people had phoned back to tell her how calming her voice had been during an emergency.

"I guess it's reassuring," she said.

She told the manager, and anyone else who would listen, that she loved her job. Occasionally the help would sneak an extra doughnut into her bag, tempting Audrey with a new flavor, but her request was always identical: tea, plain, and a plain doughnut.

Audrey walked home, having taken a cab to work the night before. ("Really safer," she'd explained.) Her path was the same as Mrs. White's, though they traveled in different directions. Once when Audrey had crossed to the opposite side of the street to avoid some construction, she passed a stern-looking woman, dressed in a tan raincoat and a black hat and said hello. She received no response.

No one appeared to miss Mrs. White's conversation. Even before she gave it up altogether, she'd been tight-lipped: throughout her childhood and adolescence and early years of marriage the tiny stream of her utterances diminished, finally, willfully, drying up. Once, just after the birth of their son, Mr. White heard his wife crooning and he laughed with delight. She mistook this for criticism and never sang again. Friends whose wives had venomous tongues, incessant gossips that poisoned the town's grapevine, told Mr. White how lucky he was.

If a new waitress was on, Mrs. white would vocalize her request, forever using the same words, "Tea with nothing in it and one plain doughnut." The "to go" was understood since she made no effort to sit. On those rare occasions when her voice took to the air it sounded as ordinary as the tea she drank, though she herself knew it

had journeyed miles to get there.

Mrs. White first became vaguely aware of Audrey Voxe the day the deaf baker, urged on by the sales manager and Marie Paradise, asked if Audrey would give him speech lessons.

"I hear you have a beautiful voice," the baker said, his own filled with echoes and murmurings, the hum of a whale. "I would pay of course and I would practice."

His desire so moved Audrey that she sunk to a stool and lingered for half an hour over her tea while eating three doughnuts.

"But I'm not trained. I have no teaching skills," she explained as he sat with her on his coffee break.

He placed two fingers on his throat and asked if she'd allow him to touch her neck as she spoke.

"Sure," she said, and the flour-dusted fingers settled just below her larynx.

"Say something that sounds nice," he requested.

She thought it over a minute. "The rain in Spain falls main--ly on the plain."

"I understand," said the baker. Getting up from his seat he added, "Please think about it. You don't have to say yes right now."

In desperation, Audrey turned to the woman who flanked the far side of the register. Her posture erect, her hat perfectly flat on her head, she seemed the very soul of composure.

"I don't think I can teach someone to speak," Audrey said, her voice filled with concern. "How do I get out of this?"

Mrs. White's expression remained unchanged and Audrey, too upset to realize she'd received no guidance, dug for her wallet. But Mrs. White had heard the question and when she claimed her breakfast, shoved the change into the waitress's hand with a bit more force than usual.

Mrs. White tried to leave the woman's question behind, but it dogged her all the way to church, partly because of the voice that had posed it, a voice so clear and distinctive that it had etched the phrases in her mind. She didn't enjoy her doughnut, having eaten it much too quickly, thrown off her regular pace. Hurrying the tea to her mouth, Mrs. White burned her tongue, which lay in her mouth swollen and pained. She sucked in air to cool the injured tip.

Each time the tongue touched her palate or the back of her teeth she shuddered. To prevent this from happening, she took the

white hanky from her handbag, one she'd washed and pressed into a neat square, and stuffed it in her mouth.

Audrey dialed the operator and asked for the Continuing Ed number at the local college. Of course the woman recognized Audrey's voice. "You know that I'll have to charge you a quarter," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Not a problem," said Audrey. "That's the least of my worries."

Audrey was hoping to find a public speaking course for the baker. The man in the registrar's office said he'd send her a catalogue.

"I'd better stop by and pick one up," Audrey explained. "I need to know right away. Can I get it from you? What's your name?"

"I'm Ernest," he said, so timid that he could have used the course himself. "Ernest Lee."

The skies had begun to cloud over but because it was warm, Audrey decided to walk. Moving at a brisk pace, she made it within 15 minutes. The woman at the front desk asked what she needed. Ernest Lee, who sat behind the first keeper, jumped up.

"It's here," he said sweetly. "I have it for you."

"Are you matriculated, Miss?" the secretary asked, determined that nothing would happen without her say so. "What will you be using the catalogue for?"

"Why, a friend," said Audrey, her voice patient and comforting.

"Oh yes. O.K., Ernest. No need to dawdle," responded the secretary, as Ernest handed the catalogue to Audrey.

"Thanks very much, Mr. Lee," Audrey said.

Ernest, thrilled by her tone, was inspired to sing as he reloaded the office's Xerox machine.

As Audrey started home a drizzle of rain began, just enough to hurry her along. She placed the catalogue closer to her body, folding her arms over it and lowering her head. Audrey felt the thud, the smacking of her right shoulder against a rigid object and heard a muffled "ohhh," all in the seconds before she actually saw the woman, the same woman she had spoken to at the doughnut shop earlier that morning.

Mrs. White, her mouth still filled with the cloth, glared at the telephone operator. Apologizing profusely, Audrey slid her hand over the woman's shoulder.

"Oh gosh—please forgive me," she said,

as they stood face to face in the rain. "I hope I haven't hurt you." Then trying to lighten things, she added, "Twice in one day I've bumped into you."

Mrs. White's stone eyes left Audrey's friendly face and traveled to the catalogue, which advertised the public speaking courses, along with computer literacy classes, on the front. Fat raindrops bounced off the rim of her hat as she pushed Audrey out of her path. The hanky, her tongue's wet bandage, had started to taste the way the fabric softener smelled.

Bea White could not, for the life of her, understand why this was happening.

When Audrey visited the shop the next day, her intention was to simply drop off the catalogue with a note saying "See page 23." But then she saw the baker waiting, back pressed against the wall, his paper hat tipped forward on his head. Greeting the waitress and placing her regular order, Audrey added, "I'll have it here." The baker waved hello, as if their meeting had been pure coincidence. Audrey motioned to two stools.

"What's your name, anyway? I don't think we were ever properly introduced," said the woman.

"Walter," he said, though it came out sounding like water.

"Well Walter," she continued, pushing her voice to sound even more helpful than usual, "I've found a course—I've even talked with the instructor. It's a little pricey but if you're really interested—and I'm not saying you have to be—this is probably the best way to go."

He dropped his big head so far forward that the hat began tumbling downward. He caught it and held it in his lap.

"Now I can help some—I'd be willing to go over things with you, say twice a week, so there'd be someone to practice with," Audrey said, knowing this was the consolation prize.

Because his head had been lowered, his eyes averted, he didn't catch the last part.

"Were you speaking?" he asked.

"That's a good example of how inept I'd be," Audrey added, embarrassed by her own waffling. "I didn't even realize you weren't watching me just then. I'd been saying that I'd be a—a tutor, I guess, if you need one."

The baker thumbed to the course description. A black and white photo showed a handsome man in a suit, arm lifted, filled with poise, talking before a group comprised mostly of women.

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"I'll take it," he said. "If I need help, I'll tell you."

Visibly relieved, Audrey nodded, and finished up her tea. She missed Mrs. White by five minutes.

Mrs. White couldn't remember the exact moment she had stopped speaking. It seemed the decision had been made little by little, over the course of her entire life. At first being "close mouthed" was fine because she was a girl, and shy, and this was acceptable, if not laudable. Then as a teenager, the teachers mistook her reticence for intelligence. She was not as smart as they thought, and did not make even Salutatorian, a good thing, since she would never have been able to give an address.

Small events robbed her of her speech; a complaint by a stranger, who told her to hush as she rode the bus home from class one day; a loud-mouthed cousin, who said Mrs. White's voice suffered from "emotional lockjaw;" the laugh from her husband; her son at four saying, when she tried to correct him, "I hate you. Just shut up. Shut up, you bad Mommy." Once a police officer, writing out a parking ticket, joked as she began to stutter a protest, "What's the matter, lady? Cat got your tongue?" If she glanced back even further, she could see herself in the play yard, at four or five, rhyming words; boat, doat, coat, loat, foat, moat, rote, toat, slowly and carefully, and a clique of tiny girls, maybe one year older, mocking her, their voices high and chime-like.

Over time the resolution came, to say as few words as possible, to measure them out like drops of blood. The silence, the vow to keep still, became the template of her life, the very form that allowed her life to continue.

Mrs. White saw Audrey leave the shop. Audrey had made such an impression that Mrs. White could now identify her even as she walked away; the long thin frame, reddish brown hair, worn in a page boy. It was touched-up, Mrs. White believed, though she'd never inspected Audrey's roots. And Audrey's raincoat had several oil marks near the hem.

Wordlessly, Mrs. White went through her routine, the waitress bringing her order directly. No one would disrupt her, not even that horrible speech lady, who seemed to be everywhere she went. No one would make her speak. During the remainder of her trip to church, Mrs. White looked around three times for any sign of

her nemesis, and satisfied that she was alone, ate her doughnut and drank her tea in peace.

When she entered the church, however, for the first time in years, she heard—vaguely—the voice of the priest. Without realizing it, she stood throughout the entire Mass, stiff as a cross while the other parishioners knelt and sat and stood.

At two o'clock in the morning, Audrey got the first of four distress calls. Initially her party mumbled between gasps; not the regulated, lascivious moans of a breather but the panicked, choked talk of someone taken ill; the call lasted less than 20 seconds. She prayed the caller would either dial the police or phone again. Nearly five minutes later, a call came in where the party refused to say anything—Audrey began with her usual "Good Morning, this is the operator," and her spiel ended abruptly when the caller slammed down the phone. The third call followed a three-minute delay. Audrey, acting on her instinct, immediately asked the silent dialer to please stay on the line, so she could send help. In the background Audrey heard a muffled cry. The caller hung up. But two minutes later the last call came and although the person (Audrey *thought* it was a woman) said no more than "He's . . ." Audrey kept the party on long enough to trace the number, find the address in the company's reverse directory, and notify both the police and the ambulance company.

"Hang on," Audrey said, her voice firm but calm. "Just hang on. That's all you have to do. The rest is taken care of," she had said, over and over.

Earlier that same night, Mrs. White had knelt on her bathroom floor, scrubbing the tub. She did this each time her husband or son used the shower, up to four times each day. The son had gone to spend the night with a friend and after setting the breakfast table, Mrs. White, who always went to bed before her husband, pulled down the coverlet on her twin, placed her rosary beneath her pillow, and fell asleep.

She woke to the sound of her husband struggling with the phone as he held his arm and chest. He was motioning toward her, tears soaking his cheeks, and she dashed out of bed and into her son's room, forgetting he had left. She hurried to the coat closet, pulled on some boots and a

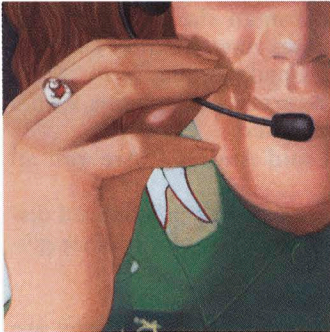
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jacket, and ran to the neighbors', who failed to hear her knocking. By the time Mrs. White got back upstairs Mr. White was begging her to dial the operator, and his arm shook and his breathing grew more labored. At first she thought he was saying, "Please, please," but he was actually calling out her name, "Bea, Bea."

She finally picked the phone up—Mr. White had knocked it under his bed, and she had to dust off the receiver—and dialed O. The voice, that woman's voice. How could it be that out of all the voices in the world that might have answered, it had to belong to the woman who was forcing her to speak? Had she somehow planned this? Mrs. White put down the receiver, tried moving her husband, getting him to his feet. In desperation he hit the phone with his hand and placed his finger in the O slot.

When Mr. White began to lose consciousness, she made herself call back, hoping another voice would answer. Hearing Audrey, all Mrs. White could say was, "He's, he's," believing, with all her heart, that Audrey was responsible for the world falling apart.



When Audrey got to the doughnut shop that morning, she forgot to ask the baker about his class, though she'd intended to do so. Instead she told the waitress that she had a really intense night, and ordered a Sanka so she could go home and sleep. Marie Paradise coaxed much of the story from her. Audrey's voice sounded terribly weary, almost pained. One of the truck drivers had to look twice to make sure it was Audrey.

"The person's alive," said Audrey. "The police phoned me back to let me know they'd taken him to the hospital. A minor heart attack. This Mr. White had a minor heart attack."

The waitress and the sales manager looked at each other.

"It's a common name," said Marie, and shrugged it off.

The manager offered Audrey two jelly-filled doughnuts and she took them without arguing.

Mrs. White's absence that day went unnoticed. Three days later, when the woman resumed her normal schedule, the waitress realized she'd missed seeing the customer earlier that week. Because Marie knew she would not get a reply, however, she didn't ask Mrs. White where she'd been.

Audrey had been plagued all week by a sense of uncertainty, as vague and as annoying as the beginnings of a cold. Did she leave the burners on? Was the door locked? Faucet turned to the far right? Matters that had never entered her consciousness now shadowed her.

At first she attributed the feeling to the baker's lessons, but they were going fine—Audrey'd held two tutoring sessions, which she'd really enjoyed. Teacher and student sat in the far corner of the doughnut shop, facing one another during the baker's 15-minute break.

"Give me a raspberry," she'd say, trying to demonstrate the TH sound, her teaching instincts absolutely correct.

"Bite down on your back teeth. You want that D in doughnut to be clear as a bell," she'd add, and the baker would comply.

Coming away from their meetings she began appreciating her own voice, acknowledging that perhaps it was, indeed, a gift. She had always entertained the thought of doing voice-overs for national commercials and was inspired to begin looking into this possibility. The sales manager, whose brother-in-law sold space for a radio station, suggested Audrey update her recordings of various endorsements. "The Diamond King on the Boulevard in Dickson City," or "Kaplans, The Store Above The Mall. Them All." The manager would then get the tape listened to, because he had connections.

Maybe it was the idea of radio work that was making her feel a bit "off." She tried blocking the whisper-like feeling in a safe and methodical fashion. Before going to work one night she unplugged all her electrical appliances (except for the fridge) hoping this would bring her silence.

Mrs. White had no strong feelings about her husband's survival.

In the first few minutes of panic, when he was thrashing about in his bed, reaching for the phone, she thought she should want him to live. Later, in the ambulance, still angered by the voice of the operator, she wished him dead. Their son was 21 and could survive without a father. The house was paid for and there would be insurance monies to live on. Her silent nature would be interpreted as grief.

The most annoying aspect of Mr. White's illness was that his hospital stay had disrupted Mrs. White's daily routine. For two days straight she was obligated to

She searched for the words to warn the younger woman, but she had just spent all she had.



appear at his bedside at 7:30 a.m., when the doctor made rounds, and listen to the physician assess the man's condition. The doctors found Mrs. White delightful; she listened carefully, so carefully she never had to ask a single question. But the doctor's visit meant Mrs. White had to forfeit her morning doughnut break and head to church on an empty stomach. She tolerated this for as short a period as was socially acceptable.

On the third day, she resumed her regimen, though after Mass she made the trek to her husband's bedside and stayed there, devotedly, until 4 p.m. By day six, partly due to Mrs. White's "attentiveness," said the doctor, Mr. White was ready to go home.

The speech lesson had been delayed by 10 minutes, due to a problem with the dough. Audrey stood by the window, eating her plain doughnut, watching the rain dance on the cars' rooftops. The baker shouted from the back, "Two more minutes, Audrey." She looked at her Timex. Having promised to meet a friend at 8:15, she knew she'd have to speed through the lesson if she was to be on time.

Taking a seat and leaning on the counter, elbows akimbo, she tapped the top lightly with her ring.

"What a beautiful ring," said the waitress. "Oh, I just love it."

Audrey glanced downward.

"Would you like it?" she asked.

The waitress shook her head, embarrassed by her own desire.

"No, no," she answered, her eye on the stone.

"My grandmother used to say, if someone really loves something you own, you should give it to them," Audrey reasoned, slipping the ring from her finger. "I never wear it. Enjoy it."

The waitress tried returning the gift, but Audrey refused to listen. "Honestly," she said, "keep it."

The baker, a fine dusting of flour over his forearms and face, sidled into his corner. They were going to work on the W sound. Audrey described it to Walter; pretend you are sucking a plum, breathe in and then blow out, releasing the fruit.

"Whisper," she said, and in hushed tones he repeated "whipper."

Audrey laughed. "I'm sorry. Repeat the word aloud. Whisper."

They tried why, while, wheel, when, whistle. Audrey glanced at her watch. It was 8 o'clock.

"White," she said distinctly, and then, before realizing it, added, "Mr. White."

On the far side of the register, at strict attention, was Mrs. White. The voice pierced her shroud of silence.

"White?" asked the baker.

"Yes, white. White," repeated Audrey.

Mrs. White held tight to every fiber of her being. She stood as the waitress fixed her order.

"I have to run," said Audrey. "We can pick this up tomorrow."

Audrey nodded to the customers on her way out, saying to the waitress who was still thanking her, "It's yours. I'm happy you like it."

The rain had grown steadier and she turned up her collar and paused before crossing the street. The sense of uneasiness seemed to overwhelm her and she turned to her right.

"Oh," Audrey said to the woman beside her, the same woman she'd seen in the shop several times now. "I didn't realize you were there. Good morning."

Mrs. White returned the greeting with a look of absolute hatred.

"My gosh," said Audrey, "Are you all right?"

Two words came, words pronounced distinctly, in the same voice of a teacher giving a lesson.

"Mrs. White," said Mrs. White.

"Are you—is your husband—why are you staring at me like that?" asked Audrey, the rain now pouring down her face while Mrs. White opened an umbrella and shaded only herself.

"I'd like to speak with you sometime—I've got to run—I hope everything is okay. We must speak, because I'm concerned. We have to speak," Audrey continued, stepping out into the street.

Mrs. White looked past Audrey, at the oncoming car, its wipers swishing wildly. She searched for the words to warn the younger woman, but she had just spent all she had.

The driver dashed from the car, frantically, and placed his fingers on Audrey's neck, hoping for a pulse. There was none. Mrs. White, managing the doughnut, tea, and umbrella quite adeptly, continued on her trip to church. By the time the others hurried from the shop, she was well on her way.

Once in the Cathedral, she moved to a center aisle. The Mass passed without incident, until the Kiss of Peace, when she joined with the congregation, turned to her neighbor, and said in a voice as lovely as Audrey's, as she grasped the woman's hand, "Peace be with you." ■

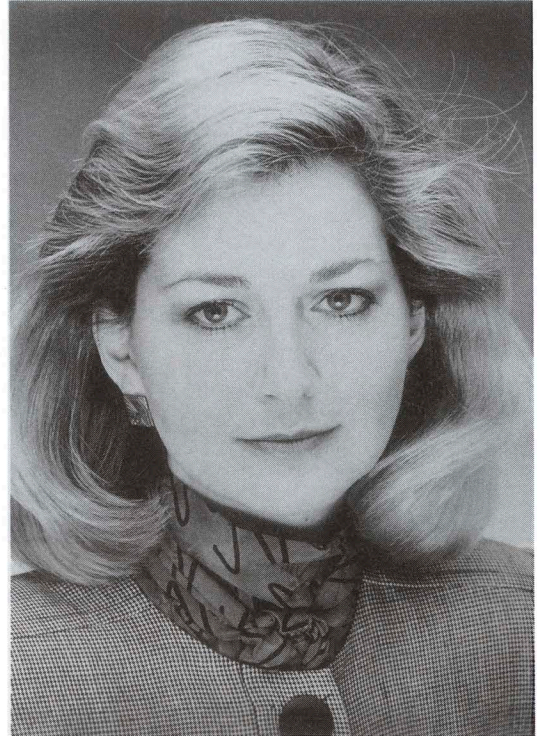
Everything God Makes *Has Dignity*

There's a common denominator in all of us that transcends accidents of birth, whether you're born into a rich family or poor family," says Patrice Adcroft. "I'm trying to transmit some kind of universal truth that cuts across any kind of class system."

Adcroft does just that in her first book, *Every Day Doughnuts*, an episodic novel to be published by St. Martin's Press in November. In chapters that stand alone as short stories, we meet a cast of characters that have some relationship with the Every Day Doughnut shop: a waitress who moonlights as a belly dancer to buy extras for her children; a retarded young man suffering from unrequited love; a born-again baker who preaches as he works. The stories weave the characters together, creating a rich tapestry of everyday life.

"So many people have said to me, 'I've never known anyone from a blue-collar background. I can't believe how interesting these people's lives are, the things they feel,'" says Adcroft. "That's an attitude I absolutely abhor. I think most lives have a wonderful dignity about them if you examine them."

A 1976 SU graduate with degrees in creative writing and magazine journalism, Adcroft has had an impressive career in journalism. A former editor at *Good Housekeeping* and CBS magazines, Adcroft was named editor of *Omni* magazine in 1986 at age 30, becoming one of the youngest editors ever to head a national magazine. She resigned in October 1990, protesting



Every Day Doughnuts author Patrice Adcroft

the publishing of an advertisement on the magazine's cover. She spent the next year writing *Every Day Doughnuts*.

Adcroft gained her inspiration from her father's doughnut shop in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where she worked from age 14 through college. "I always wanted to be a fiction writer," she says. "I didn't always have the idea that, someday I was going to do a book on my father's doughnut shop. Basically, I was just interested in people's lives. These characters would not rest."

Adcroft, who is working on her second novel, joins the Syracuse University faculty this fall as an assistant visiting professor of journalism.

—RENÉE GEARHART LEVY

