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The Forgotten Broadcast

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Introduction

The hiss came first, a soft blanket laid over everything, like fog smothering a harbor at dawn. Ava Mercer cued the reel into the Studer, thumbs steady on the flanges, and watched the tape take the capstan with a familiar, satisfying catch. Her studio—two rooms above a bait-and-tackle shop a block from the water—smelled faintly of coffee and solder. On the wall, shelves sagged with plastic bins labeled in a neat, small hand: 45s, Spools A-L, Orphaned Cassettes, Untagged Calls. The late light threaded through blinds and broke across the waveform monitor, turning the screen into a nocturne of blues and oranges. She lived for these quiet hours, when voices from other decades rose like seabirds in the static and she could make sense of their flight.

She worked alone more often than not. It suited her. Make the room quiet, tighten the world until it's just you and the signal. Her podcast, *Echoes & Evidence*, barely paid the rent, but it had earned her the access she craved: museums offloading tape, collectors whose attics were an accidental archive, a university library with boxes of reels no one had touched since Carter. Ava's gifts were patience and an ear that could find a mosquito in a thunderstorm. Tonight's job was a commission from a maritime museum—digitize a grab bag of shortwave recordings from the late 1970s, log anything of note, and pull clips for an exhibit on Cold War radio. It wasn't glamorous, but she liked the work's honesty. Noise. Signal. A fragile ledger.

On her desk, she kept her tools where routine would find them without thought: a jeweler's loupe, a splicing block, fresh leader tape, a weighted pencil that had belonged to her mother. The laptop hummed with the spectral view open, its grayscale canyon walls flickering as the reel spun. Ava rode the gain with light touches, smoothing out the worst of the dropout with a gentle crossfade, de-clicking a handful of sharp pops with surgical taps. She leaned closer, eyes narrow, when the broadcast climbed out of the murk—a station ID half-swallowed by static, a weather report read with patience, music that could have been a hymn if not for the tinny, faraway organ.

She almost missed it. A cluster of tones, too soft to be intended for the casual ear, rode beneath a burst of applause from what sounded like a live segment. In the spectrogram, they hung like fine threads at the bottom of the display between 18 and 22 kHz, a place most speakers barely touched. Ava paused the tape, rolled it back half a centimeter, and zoomed in until the pixels stair-stepped. She listened again, this time with the high-pass filter pulled down to catch the subaudible. There—three notes, spaced unevenly, then a measured pause that felt less like silence than like waiting. She felt the prickle that sometimes warned her she'd stumbled onto something, the same sensation she'd had the first time a woman's voice emerged from a water-

warped cassette to name a lost brother.

It could be nothing. Engineers did stranger things back then—test tones, carrier signals, the debris of broadcast. Still, the pattern nagged. Ava marked the timecode, annotated her log: “1979-02-14, 0103 UTC. Underlay tones? Possible cue sequence. Revisit.” She didn’t post these notes; the public-facing part of her work was polished, narrative, a ten-minute story about what a tape could teach. The messy part—the hours of listening, the decisions about what to enhance and what to leave alone—lived here in scrawls and markers and the low thrum of the refrigerator in the next room. She adjusted the EQ, gently, like laying a finger on a pulse. The three notes became five. The pause repeated. Beneath the broadcast, something was speaking in the language of machines.

Ava sat back and rubbed her eyes. It was late enough that the boats below had gone dark, masts ticking in a wind she couldn’t hear. Her friends, the few she kept, would say she overdid it, chased curiosities until sleep slipped away and meals became optional. They were right. But there was a solace in the hunt that the rest of her life didn’t offer: a trail that rewarded attention, a puzzle whose edges would eventually meet. She reached for her phone, then stopped. No one to text about this yet. And this—this was probably a footnote. A curiosity to mention in a caption, a neat audio trick from a lost winter in 1979. She told herself that and almost, almost believed it.

She rolled the tape again and let the broadcast ride. Voices, music, a call-in show she recognized from other reels in the box. The host laughed, a shape like a mountain in the waveform, and over it slipped the thread of tones, patient as a clock. She dropped a marker every time they came, building a breadcrumb trail in the timeline. A habit of hers: when something felt like a pattern, treat it like one. Give it the respect of structure and it might answer with meaning. She thought of Dr. Miriam Chao, a radio historian she sometimes pestered with questions; Miriam would say, You don’t always find a ghost station when you go looking. But sometimes they find you.

When the reel reached leader and flapped, gentle as a fish, Ava stopped the machine and sat with the quiet it left behind. The room held its breath. Through the window, a foghorn moaned once, low and carrying. She labeled the file, precise as a ritual: MM79_BOX3_REEL7_MASTER. Then she copied a segment—just the minute around the tone cluster—and dropped it into a new project. She would sleep on it, listen again in the morning with better ears. Maybe run a spectral subtraction, see what remained when she stripped the broadcast away. Maybe it was an engineer’s prank; maybe it was nothing.

She saved, closed the laptop, and stood, joints stiff from hours in a chair that had never fit her right. On the corkboard by the door hung her show’s production calendar—a lattice of deadlines and sticky notes—but her eye caught on the blank space tomorrow, a rare absence. She smiled, faint, almost reflexive. A day with

nothing scheduled meant she could listen without guilt. On the way out, she flicked off the power strips one by one, the room dimming as the LEDs winked away, the silence deepening. Behind it, in memory, she heard the tones again, counting off in their small, stubborn cadence.

In the darkened hall, with the door locked and the harbor breathing below, Ava told herself the same lie she always used to make curiosity feel harmless. It's just a tape. She would start fresh in the morning, pull a higher-resolution transfer, and catalogue the anomaly. Then she'd move on. She didn't see the pattern yet, not really. She didn't know that somewhere, someone else would be listening too. Tomorrow would begin with the tape.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Tape

The following morning, the harbor light was sharp and indifferent. Ava Mercer nursed a lukewarm coffee, the kind that tasted more of regret than caffeine, and stared at the spectral analysis of the *MM79_BOX3_REEL7_MASTER* segment. Sleep had done little to dislodge the feeling that she was picking at a loose thread in a tapestry she shouldn't touch. Her studio, usually a sanctuary, felt different today, charged with a faint hum that wasn't electrical.

She'd spent an hour transferring the segment at a higher bitrate, cleaning it further, reducing the ambient tape hiss and the faint bleed-through from the next track. The result was crisp, almost clinical. The host's voice, a comforting baritone, now sounded unnervingly clear as he introduced a local musician. And beneath it, stripped of most of its camouflage, the tones were undeniable.

She isolated them, pulling them out like splinters. Three distinct sine waves, followed by a rhythmic silence, then two more, a slightly different pitch. Then the silence again. It wasn't random. It was too precise, too... deliberate. An engineer's prank? Possibly. But why bury it so deep, so carefully? The frequency range was unusual, almost on the edge of human hearing for most, certainly for the cheap radio speakers of 1979.

Ava opened a new session in her audio workstation, a clean slate. She imported the isolated tone sequence and looped it. *Beep. Boop. Bop. Pause. Chirp. Whir.* The sounds were almost musical, in a minimalist, unsettling way. She tried to match them to common signaling protocols - morse code, DTMF tones, even old naval sonar pings. Nothing fit perfectly. The intervals were the most telling: not uniform, but patterned. A code, perhaps, but one she didn't recognize.

Her fingers danced over the keyboard, running various filters. She tried boosting the harmonics, hoping to find a hidden carrier frequency, but it only amplified the oddity. The tones were pure, almost synthesized, which was an anomaly in itself for a 1979 shortwave broadcast, usually rife with analog imperfections. This suggested an intentional signal, perhaps generated digitally or with very precise analog equipment.

She considered posting an inquiry on an old radio enthusiasts forum, a place where people still debated the minutiae of long-dead frequencies and obscure transmitters. But something held her back. A whisper of caution she couldn't quite articulate. This felt different from the usual academic curiosities. Too neat. Too hidden.

Instead, she opened a fresh document and started logging the frequencies and durations of each tone, the exact timing of the pauses. She drew a rough visual

representation, a kind of musical notation for her eyes only. It looked like a fragmented bar code, or a strange, broken rhythm. *Dot-dot-dash, dot-dash.*

Ava leaned back, her chair groaning in protest. She had a habit of staring at patterns until they resolved themselves, until the hidden order revealed itself. This pattern, however, remained stubbornly opaque. It was a language she didn't speak, a message without context. Yet, she felt its weight, a quiet insistence that demanded attention.

Her phone buzzed, startling her. It was a text from her friend, Chloe, asking if she was coming to trivia night. Ava quickly typed a "maybe" and dismissed the notification. Trivia seemed impossibly trivial right now. Her world had shrunk to the glowing screen, the oscillating waveforms, and the stubborn insistence of those buried tones.

She pulled up the full 1979 broadcast again, this time with the spectral view zoomed in on the high-frequency range. The tones didn't appear randomly. They were interspersed with certain segments of the show - a caller's question, a particular song, a specific news report. It was almost as if they were annotating the broadcast itself. But for whom? And why?

The thought sparked a new line of inquiry. What if the tones weren't a standalone message, but a key? A way to unlock information hidden *within* the broadcast itself? Like a secret cypher that highlighted specific words or phrases. That would explain the subtle placement, the way they ducked and weaved around the main audio without disrupting it.

She spent the next few hours cross-referencing the tone bursts with the content of the broadcast. It was tedious, slow work. The initial burst appeared during a caller's discussion about local government corruption. The next, during a song with lyrics about "hidden truths." Another, when the host announced a community meeting about a controversial development project.

Coincidence? Or design? Ava was a meticulous archivist; she believed in evidence, not leaps of faith. But the coincidences were starting to pile up, too neatly to ignore. She zoomed in on the segment where the tones first appeared, listening to the caller's voice, trying to discern anything unusual. The man sounded agitated, passionate about a specific zoning change.

"They're selling off our coastline, folks, piece by piece!" the caller had exclaimed, his voice crackling with static. "And nobody's asking *why*."

Just then, the tones had played, a silent emphasis. Ava felt a chill creep up her spine. This wasn't just technical curiosa. This was *pointing*.

Her mind raced, connecting disparate pieces. A decades-old broadcast, a hidden

sequence of tones, and content that hinted at malfeasance. She thought of all the lost recordings she'd handled, the fleeting voices of history. How many had held secrets like this, buried in plain sight?

She isolated the caller's segment, ran it through a vocal enhancer, and then used a spectrum analyzer. Nothing hidden in his voice itself. The tones remained the anomaly. But they felt less like a technical glitch and more like a carefully constructed breadcrumb.

The sun had shifted, painting the studio in long, golden streaks. Ava realized she hadn't eaten since yesterday. Her stomach rumbled in protest, but she ignored it. The puzzle had her in its grip, a familiar and irresistible pull.

She pulled up her Echoes & Evidence podcast template. Maybe, just maybe, this deserved a teaser. Not the full story, not yet. Just a snippet, a hint of the discovery, something to gauge a reaction. She was known for unearthing obscure historical audio. This would fit her brand.

She edited down a tight, thirty-second clip: the moment the applause swelled, then the distinct, almost melodic *beep-boop-bop* pushing through the background. No explanation, just the raw audio. A mystery, pure and simple.

She typed a caption: "Listening closely to a 1979 shortwave broadcast for a new project. Sometimes, the past speaks in frequencies we've forgotten. Any thoughts on what this might be?" She attached the audio file.

Her finger hovered over the 'post' button. It was a small, almost innocuous act. A way to share a curious find, to tap into the collective knowledge of her online community. She told herself it was harmless. Academic. But a part of her, the deeper part that always found the pattern, knew she was stepping onto a path that was no longer confined to the quiet hum of her studio.

With a deep breath, Ava clicked 'Post.' The digital signal shot out into the ether, carrying with it not just the sound, but an unspoken challenge. She didn't know it then, but in that single act, she had opened a door she wouldn't be able to close. The tape had spoken, and now, by posting it, Ava had called for a reply.

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