



## Season 1 Episode 7: Rosie

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No electricity. No phones. No internet. That was the only way to fight the listening. As people learn how to live without all modern technology, a young boy struggles to understand the world. Part 3 of the Plantalk trilogy.

Link to the episode: <https://lab.sapienship.co/rosie/>

## Transcript

“Rosie? Rosie! Come on! Walkies! Time to go!”

It was still early but there were plenty of people out on the street. People seemed to spend more time outdoors now. Some were jogging, others just walking in the thin sunshine. More than a few stood looking carefully at the trees which lined the residential road, or at the leylandii hedges which edged most of the private gardens. Occasionally a hand would reach out gingerly to touch some tree bark or a leaf, before snapping back, as if stung or bitten.

Like Dev, some of his neighbors had also decided to take their dogs out for a walk. What else was there to do? Most people had been off work since the pulse, the terrifying night when the sky high up overhead had flashed with nuclear weapons designed to destroy all electronic devices. And a lot of other people were still recovering from what the media called 'the listening epidemic'. Not that many people were paying attention to the media. The internet was still out and although some domestic radio services had apparently resumed, most people didn't have analogue radios to pick up the signals.

Out of habit, Dev still put his cellphone in his pocket every morning, but it was totally dead. On one level he knew it might never work again, but he found himself fishing it out regularly throughout the day, absent-mindedly trying to check social media feeds which no longer existed. Information came by word of mouth now, as if it was the Middle Ages. But Dev didn't really like talking to other people, so he had no real idea what was happening in the world.

Fortunately, someone had thought of people like Dev. At the end of the street was a police vehicle, with a loudhailer mounted on its roof. “Water deliveries on Tuesdays and Fridays at 3pm!” it announced with a tinny crackle. “Food parcels can be collected from the community center on presentation of photo identification. Please queue in an orderly manner. There is enough for everyone. Together,” it added, “we will get through this crisis.”

It was now eight weeks since the listening had begun, and six days since it had abruptly stopped, along with the internet, TV, electricity - all of modern life basically. Dev clearly remembered how it had all started. For him, as for so many others, it had started with a new toy. “She's your best friend,” the advertisement had claimed. “But do you know what she's really thinking? With Petalk, you can finally hear what your pet is feeling!”

But it wasn't really true. Dev had downloaded it the day it was launched. According to the instructions, he just needed to point his phone camera or smart glasses at Rosie. And sure enough, as soon as he did, he heard a babble of words, delivered in a generic British accent: "Happy! Happy happy happy! Walkies time? Walkies? Happy!"

As it was linked to his social media profile, it soon tailored its output. "Hungry, Dev!" Rosie now appeared to say when he called her. "Dinner! Food! Rosie hungry! Feed me, Dev! Go walkies to the park after?"

She was silent now, of course. Or rather, not silent, but her communication had reverted to panting and the occasional bark of excitement. Dog language. This, at least, was genuine. His phone had been fried during the electromagnetic pulses that governments around the world had authorized. Rosie would never "talk" in that silly English accent again. Dev knew now that she never had. It was all a trick, a game. The camera scanned Rosie's face and body language for visual cues and translated them into simple English sentences and words. The small print did say this somewhere, but who bothers reading that? Certainly not the owners whose pets inspired them to protest about using animals for food or products. Dev had only realized this when he enthusiastically gave his earbud to his father so that he could try the experience... and "Rosie" had called him Dev too.

"Don't be so upset!" his dad had said. "You're not meant to take it seriously. It's just a bit of fun."

But Dev was upset. Rosie was his best friend. He had yearned to talk to her and for a brief moment, it had seemed possible. Discovering it was just a trick, a toy, was very upsetting for him. But other people seemed to enjoy it. Sales of Petalk had escalated into the tens of millions in almost no time.

Then laws began to change. Meat all but vanished from supermarkets. Then milk and dairy products too. It became harder and harder to find dog food for Rosie, and Dev's dad began buying up everything he could, to stockpile it. Commentators on the internet said it was all because of an 'imaginary point of empathy'. People started believing they could talk to their dogs and cats, or to cows and sheep, and of course they were upset to think animals were being exploited and demanded urgent change.

Petalk was such a hit that the follow-up tech, Plantalk, seemed all too predictable. But there was a crucial difference: Plantalk wasn't a toy. It was actually an app that used the latest smart glasses properties to scan for signals emitted by trees, fungi and other plant species and then transliterated them into known aspects of plant communication. It was a whole new breakthrough in biology and technology, and the world went mad for it, literally.

It was inevitably repetitive and simplistic, but also hypnotically persuasive. It seemed to completely grab the attention of so many people. They would stop everything and just listen to plants, not eating, barely sleeping – just listening. Or else they formed large groups and dedicated their lives to saving plants. They would grab at you and plead with you to listen too. They protested in parliament, glued themselves to factory entrances, and even stormed supermarkets. Dev had listened to the plants and wasn't impressed – he was scared.

There was nothing imaginary about Plantalk. And there had been nothing imaginary about the hordes of people, Dev's mum included, who just seemed to suddenly give up on their lives, sitting still and quietly weeping in gardens and parks across the planet. Dev tried talking to his mum, and at first she seemed to recognize him, but she wouldn't speak, and after a day or so, she stopped reacting to him or Rosie, or even dad. She wouldn't come into the house. She was damp from dew, cold to the touch and not eating. Dev had become really worried.

He was worried now too, but for different reasons. There was a huge queue outside the community center, and some people were shouting. Dev hated crowds and he hated shouting even more. But he forced himself to join the queue, looking down at Rosie to avoid catching anyone's eye. "Sit, Rosie!" he said, and the spaniel responded obediently. "Please wait your turn!" called a crackling loudspeaker. "There's enough food for everyone. We'll see everybody in due course. Please wait your turn with due consideration to others!"

Slowly the queue edged forward. Dev noticed that some people were filthy, as if they hadn't washed in a long time. Others looked scared, like him, or hungry. Some were shivering. Winter was coming soon. Dev hoped things would be back to normal before the snow came. He didn't think many of these people would survive in snow.

"Four years!" said a woman behind him. "They're saying it'll be four bloody years before they get everything up and running again! How are we supposed to survive? No heating or water, and having to queue for handouts like this!"

"At least you have your daughter back," said another woman.

"Aye, but for how long? How are we going to live like this? No electricity, no work to go to. No shops and no money. No transport or fuel. No emergency services."

"We did before," said the second woman. "A long time ago. We can do it again."

"Can we, though? And what if it happens again? If they can do this pulse thing once, they could do it a second time!"

"The government did it to stop all that listening," said the second woman. "They won't do it again. It was an emergency. They had to do it. To turn off the listening."

"But how do you know that? It might have been terrorists, or another country. Those people on the radio who say they're the government – how do we know if they really are? They could be anyone."

"You heard the prime minister yourself!" said the second woman.

"I heard someone who sounded a bit like her! I've got no evidence."

Dev reached the front of the queue at last. He handed over his ID and once it had been checked against a paper file, he was handed a bag of groceries through a window. He looked inside it.

"There's no dog food," he complained.

"Correct," said a voice through the hatch. "We're feeding people, not dogs. It's a global emergency, or didn't you notice?"

"But how do I feed Rosie?" he asked, tears forming in his eyes.

"I guess you don't," said the man. "Now move along. We've a lot of people to see today."

"Come on, Rosie," Dev said dejectedly. "Time to go."

He could hear his mum crying again as he entered the house. She did it a lot nowadays, but he still felt it was better than when she'd sat in the garden all night.

His dad gently tried to coax her to eat, but she was reluctant, saying she couldn't because she knew what the plants were thinking.

Dev went out to the garden with Rosie and threw her a ball. The roses swayed gently in the breeze, and some of the remaining petals tumbled onto the muddy grass. They looked unhealthy to Dev. He didn't think they would last through the winter.

## Questions for reflection and discussion

The following questions can be used for a group activity (in a classroom or otherwise) or for personal reflection after listening to the episode.

1. In the story, the internet and all electronic devices were terminated to stop the “listening”. Do you think it’s justified to block internet access in certain scenarios? If so, in what kind of scenarios?
2. Do you remember a time when you had no internet access for more than a few hours? How did that feel? Do you think you would be able to live without internet connection? What’s the longest time you have gone without accessing the internet?
3. Some people argue that access to the internet is a human right. Do you agree?
4. What would happen where you live if the electricity supply was cut off for an extended period of time?
5. Do you have a pet? If so, do you feel that you can communicate with it? Would you like to be able to know what it’s really thinking?
6. If we could learn to communicate with animals, what do you think they might tell us?
7. Recent research indicates that plants can communicate with one another via electric signals from their roots, or via pollen or by other means. Does this make you think about plants differently?