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Silence = Death

a short story

by

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I told my mama I’d never end up here. Swore up and down I’d stop “messin’ around” with those pretty boys stumbling out of Hollywood Hots on Sundays. That didn’t stop her from tellin’ me it was all my fault when I told her that her worst fear was true. That terror in her eyes was the last thing I saw before the weathered wood of the front door slammed. Now, the pale walls of the isolation ward stare back and won’t stop. The pink triangle drawn on my whiteboard glares impatiently as it bleeds and stales. I would get up and wipe it away if my head would quit throbbing.

The nurse stops by every mornin’ to check on me. Each time, the same question: “Will you be purchasing the pill today?” Each time, the same answer: a sterile hum of silence. It tastes like death on my tongue, and she knows it. She brings me tea to calm my churnin’ stomach and scratchy throat—that’s all she can do, ‘til I can cough up more than just bile.

I hear that damned trolley every four hours, squealin’ its way to the white man in the room next to me. I can hear the pill rattlin’ around in its bottle, the small talk, and the dip of silence when he swallows it. Ten thousand bucks a year thrown down the gullet every four hours, every day. It keeps me up at night: the trolley, the pill, the man. He has a red ribbon tied around his doorknob in a tidy lil’ bow, like he doesn’t mind being trapped here. With me.

I’ve seen the way people look at us as they pass by our ward, all snide glances and curled lips. As if we’re some kind of sinful disease they’ll catch if they stare for too long. By now, I don’t have the heart to believe that they’re wrong. I avoid my own eyes in the mirror, scared of how unrecognizable I must have become. This transgressor, this devil that turned on his God without a backwards glance, the one my mama watched consume her sweet child. The creature she shut out that day; I heard the thump of her knees hittin’ the floor as she prayed and prayed. I stood there for hours, soaking in the shame of being as close to God as I’d ever be again.

They still fall from my tainted lips, the prayers, though they don’t include His name anymore. I beg for the trolley to quit screaming, for the pill to fall off it and roll into my desperate hands. *AZT,* I roll its name ‘round in my mouth every time it squeaks by. I’ve always wondered what it would taste like, if it lingers like hope on your tongue. Like a lifeline, like a second chance. Like fire.

As the monotonous days roll by, the leaves turn red and waste away outside my window. The nurse always opens the curtain when she does her rounds, givin’ me a sad smile each time. I reach over and yank ‘em shut as soon as the door clicks after her—not to sleep, just not to see. There’s enough withering in this room without the trees doin’ it too. I don’t want to watch those bloody leaves collect outside my window. I don’t need to see them shrivel up and turn to dust.

The more the leaves fall, the more red-hot jealousy I feel simmerin’ in my throat. My jaw clenches when the trolley screeches by my door. It ain’t fair how the man don’t pray to wake up the next day, all because he got some coins to throw around. I bet his mama still loves him. I bet he still says God’s name and looks his reflection in the eye. I hear the ribbon each time the nurse turns the doorknob, each time she gives him more life. My room feels less like a prison and more like a graveyard with every squeak of the trolley. The nurse brings me a vase of flowers and places it on my windowsill like I’m already gone. I think I might as well be.

Leaves turn to snow and jealousy turns to anger. The hospital has been lit up with lights and red bows and too many smiles, and I still can’t escape it. The man’s family visits and the trolley screams by while they share stories and laugh. I can hear their teeth gratin’ in grins as he swallows his four hours worth of life. The taste of death grows in my mouth like a sore.

A while after, the nurse stops by to open my curtain. Her eyes linger on the threadbare hospital blanket wrapped around my shiverin’ legs. “You know they started a memorial quilt of some sort? I heard it has around two thousand names now. Ain’t that nice?” Her eyes pick me apart like a vulture.

“Mhm.”

“Would you want your name on it?”

I can’t help but wonder if she asked the man the same thing—somethin’ tells me she didn’t. I cough in response. She hurries out of the room like she doesn’t want to risk it.

Death hangs over the isolation ward like a curtain. I feel it creeping closer, repelled only by the cry of the trolley. It slips around corners, creeps under door frames, and settles on the ground like dust. My cough gets worse, and the night sweats take up the rest of the silence in the absence of the trolley.

In the mornin’, the red biohazard bucket creeps into my dreams and startles me awake. The shock sets off a coughin’ fit that rattles every bone and fills the room like smoke. I hack up bile and sin and shame and something that tastes like death. The nurse doesn’t come runnin’, and I’m sure she’s praying that she can finally replace me with someone who can pay. After I’m done, the room is too quiet—sounds almost like a funeral, if only I weren’t still breathing.

*I trace my name into the hospital blanket.*

The trolley shrieks by once more, pill rattlin’ away atop it. The nurse pauses before she opens the door and I wonder if the ribbon is drooping. Come to think of it, I don’t hear the usual ear-bleedin’ melody of Christmas music coming from the man’s room. Even my shiverin’ stills as I listen. Finally she opens the door, and I hear her gasp. I hear the pill bottle hit the ground with a hollow rattle. She yells somethin’ to the staff but I can’t hear it over the ringin’ in my ears. It sounds like a church bell. It sounds like death.

Different nurses come by the next few days. They don’t ask me about the pill, just buzz around the room like flies around a corpse. None mention the man. The days after his death pass by hesitantly, as if feelin’ their way through the dark. Shock and numbness hang in the air, sharp and dense. My reality crashes down around me in slow motion. The hope I held, I realize, was for him. It had always been for him, because it was futile to hold it for myself. What chance did I have, bereft of the money to make miracles happen? The walls of the room stare sadly as my whole world flips. *Just tell me how he died,* I beg the pink triangle still etched on the whiteboard. *Tell me how he died and I didn’t.*

The snowflakes outside my window swirl as I spiral into madness. I scream God’s name in my mind, because I no longer feel the shame that stopped me. I curse at Him for taking another one of us. I howl at Him that it should’ve been me, that’s how it was supposed to be. I rage at myself for taking his hope for granted. I mourn the person I could have known.

*I trace his name into the blanket. December 1987.*

I’m halfway through a dream of his funeral—the tears of his family leave an ache in my chest—when our regular nurse comes in. My eyes snap open at the sound of the door and I’m wide awake at the sight of her. The blanket clings to me in fearful anticipation. I grip it like a hand I never got to shake. The walls and I watch her with wary eyes as she creeps over to the window and opens the curtains. I don’t flinch at the light streamin’ in. “I’m sorry,” she begins. “I’m so sorry.”

“Tell me why. Why him?”

I recognize the look on her face. The weight of sin. “He… he overdosed.”

It hits me like a punch. Like a bullet. Like a brick thrown from the burnin’ rubble of a building. “On *what?*”

She falters. Her eyes pick apart the loose threads of the blanket. “AZT.”

That sour taste blooms in my mouth again, but this time it lingers like death. It still burns like fire. I feel it in my throat as I smile, full of venom and ash. “Get out of my room.”

“I gave him the proper amount. It was only just approved as a treatment option, and he knew the risks.” Her hands shake as she pulls somethin’ out of her pocket. “He told me he wanted you to have this. In case he went first.”

I take the ribbon and it smolders in my fingers, but doesn’t burn. It warms the chill in my bones and starts a fire in my stomach.

With the embers glowin’ in my eyes, she doesn’t need to be told to leave again. She hurries out of the room, hands wrung and head bowed.

With her gone, I twist the ribbon around my fingers. It feels like hope in my hands, more hope than I ever felt for the pill. More hope than I’ve felt for myself. It fills my blood, heats me like liquor thrown back beside a pretty boy at a bar. I close my eyes and I see him, the man, smiling at me with his own shot in hand.

“I’ll make it out of here, with this.” I hold up the ribbon. “I promise.”

He nods, fire in his eyes. “We’ll make it.”

When I wake up the next mornin’, the ward is too quiet. Too still. Too stagnant. The ribbon is still wound tightly around my fingers. I squeeze it and it squeezes back. For the first time in God knows how long, I swing my feet over the side of the bed and stand up. The floor doesn’t feel cold, like I used to think it would. Instead, it greets me with the warmth of a friend. A hope. A fire.

The walls shrink back as I approach them, but the pink triangle watches intently. It watches me grab the marker left on the whiteboard. We meet eyes briefly, and I swear it smiles back. The ribbon beams and tightens in my hand. Bendin’ down, I aim the marker under the triangle and etch our phrase:  
  
 *Silence = Death.*