

Short Story Contest

November 2021



PROMPT: You live in a busy city, where the sound of traffic is constant. One morning you wake up to complete silence . . .

[Untitled]

by **Lauren Eller**

The windows that Walgreens' doors are made of are surprisingly easy to break. All it took for Garrett to break one was a medium-sized, slightly jagged rock he found confidently discarded by the doors. The urgency with which he broke the locked doors may have had an impact on the outcome.

Using his gloved hands to break the remaining glass in his way, Garrett scrambled into the deserted convenience store and made a dash for the back of the store where the pharmacy was located. The counter was easy to clear— though a computer was knocked to the ground in the process— but locating the medication he needed was much harder.

“Ox-carb-a-ze-pine... where’s the fucking oxcarbazepine...” he struggled to read the name off his hand. Three days ago, Garrett had run out of his medication and, it being a Friday night that he’d run out, he hadn’t been able to get ahold of his psychiatrist to refill his prescription.

When Garrett first woke up today, his first instinct was to reach for his pill bottle, the little orange thing he kept like an ornament on his bedside table at all times, but quickly remembered he was out when he was met with no pills clinking against the sides of the bottle. At the absence of the noise, he chucked the bottle away from him and stuck his head back under his pillow to avoid experiencing another day of withdrawal symptoms. Then, Garrett noticed that putting his head under his pillow didn’t block out any of the noise coming from outside his bedroom’s street-side windows. There were no noises to block out. Garrett slowly lifted the pillow from his head and sat up, knocking his fist against the side of his head a bit to check he could still hear and wasn’t suddenly deaf. The faint rustle of displaced hair and the *thunk* as the bones of his hand met his skull confirmed he was in fact still fully intact, but it didn’t explain the lack of sound pollution typical of downtown Nashville at 8:00 o’clock on a Monday morning.

The next sound came from his tattered blanket shifting against his scratchy sheets as he rushed to get up and look out his window, and another came when he quickly ripped the curtains covering his view of the outside across the metal rod.

No one was outside. Certainly, there were cars in the street— none occupied, strangely, nor was a single one running— and trash everywhere, much more than was usual even in the part of town he lived in. No barking dogs, no pedestrians chatting, no men hawking magazines or street food or wares.

Everything was eerily still.

He hadn't planned to do anything that Monday besides call his psychiatrist to get his prescription refilled and to walk to the pharmacy across town to pick that prescription up. The alarming lack of other people in apparently the whole city did not derail these plans. Garrett still made an effort to call Dr Meliah, but, as he expected, the phone rang and rang until he'd eventually had enough and put his phone away. He huffed and he puffed for a good hour, wondering how the hell he was supposed to survive for who knew how many days without his medication.

He had already started to be affected by the disruption of this part of his routine and it had only been two days. Already, he had started to experience even worse depression than he had been while on or even before starting his medication, and was more anxious than ever. Getting out of bed on a good day was hard for the struggling musician, let alone getting out of bed while going through mood-stabilizer-withdrawals all of a sudden and very much alone.

So he'd determined that regardless of if he was the last man on Earth or not, he was going to get himself his goddamned meds one way or another. Putting on his heaviest coat and a matching

glove-and-scarf set that was definitely too effeminate for an authentic country boy like Garrett, he ran out into the empty streets to do just that.

If you had asked Garrett, he would have said he couldn't get to the god forsaken pharmacy fast enough; a trip that usually took thirty minutes out of his day both ways was shaved down to a measly ten. He had no reason to wait for electronic walk signs to flash at him or for throngs of people to open up enough for him to continue moving, the sidewalks were as empty as his pill bottle from that morning. The extra running space was obviously less of a detriment to his well-being than an empty bottle of life changing medication, but it did remind him he had forgotten his inhaler somewhere in his shitty little shoebox of an apartment.

Running to the store was not the best choice Garrett had ever made, but it wasn't the worst one either. Recently, he'd started to agree with his parents that the worst decision he'd ever made was moving to Music City to pursue a singing career. He remembered this as he panted in front of a venue he'd played at every Thursday night for the past five months, hands on the back of his neck, trying hard to catch his breath with a stitch in his side and his lungs refusing to work properly.

Every week's crowd was just as disappointing as the last; few people ever showed up, hardly anyone stayed for his whole set or even paid him any mind, and it was a rare occasion that someone would tip him or compliment the music he wrote. Garrett had just about given up. His music was his passion and to think that maybe his parents were right about his imminent failure as a musician was soul-shattering. He didn't want to adopt the mindset that non-lucrative, artistic ventures were unworthy of attention or focus, but he had started to see that his dreams weren't going to come true.

His parents had warned him that dropping out of college and moving to Nashville alone after only three semesters in business was a bad idea but he had refused to entertain or even listen to them. His friends and family had told him the music he'd written was good and his talent for singing had always been a talking point in his otherwise tone deaf family, so he figured that all of that combined with all the passion he had for the art, he'd be able to make it big fairly easily. Well, it'd been almost a full calendar year and all he'd done is flop from dive bar to sleazy dive bar across the city of Nashville.

Garrett continued to run, not pushing himself nearly as hard as he previously had, having learned his lesson— the faster he got away from his various present and previous venues, though, the better, so he continued to jog as his breath crystallized around him. Dwelling on such things, his therapist had once said, was unproductive and would only lead to reinforcing obsessive thought processes and affirm intrusive thoughts. He just had to keep reminding himself that even if his life was not perfect (yet), he was still doing something he loved to do for a living, something that most people can't say.

Did that make up for all the bullshit he had to experience as a result though? He alone lives in a roach infested studio apartment, has hardly any friends due to his dedication to “the grind,” and gets no recognition or appreciation for the one thing he loves to do more than anything in the world. Did it make up for the plethora of bar owners that shorted him on his way out every night? Did it make up for the way women looked at him as if it were funny when he told them he was a singer songwriter? Or when his landlord threatened to evict him every month? Garrett wasn't so sure his dreams were worth it anymore if *this* was what the road to stardom looked like.

And then he'd made it to the pharmacy. When he finally got ahold of the Oxcarbazepine, he shouted a victory yell into the empty store and shoved as many pill bottles into his clothes as possible, filling his pants and jacket until he was lumpy and the cabinet was almost entirely empty. The way Garrett figured it, nobody else was left which obviously left all the rest of the medicine for him. He definitely wasn't going to complain about a surplus of medication. The ringing of the store's alarms had only then registered in his mind, an afterthought in a world where he was the only person left on Earth.

He sat with the thought; *the only man left in the world*. What the fuck was he going to do now? How would he continue to survive here? Garrett froze in the broken threshold of the Walgreens he'd been exiting. He had been an entertainer and now there were no people left to entertain. Sure he'd apparently been lousy at it, but what else was he good at? What else was he good for? A college drop out with a boatload of mental illnesses didn't have much to offer the world, populated or not.

He continued making his way out of the store and out into the street, dropping onto the sidewalk with his head in his hands. Why was he the only one left? What had he done to deserve being left behind by *everyone*? After he decided to leave school, his parents left; when he performed at bars, attendees always left; when he's simply existing in the world doing nothing out of the ordinary, the entire population of Nashville somehow leaves too?

What had he done to deserve this?

What had he done to have been the only one left in the whole world? He felt like he was being punished and he broke down right there on the Walgreens sidewalk in front of an outdated Redbox machine. It occurred to Garrett that most people would probably be happy to be left alive in whatever Reckoning had to have occurred, and many would probably go around

wrecking shit around the city or stealing shit they've always wanted just because they could. He scoffed and buried his head deeper into his hands, tiny pieces of leftover glass probably imbedding themselves in his face forever. What was the point?

He was suddenly enraged at the thought. There had never been a point to this. His life had never had a purpose, though at one point he might have thought his purpose was to bring his stories to people through his music. Those dreams were dashed like the bottles he'd seen shattered across walls in the particularly seedy venues he'd performed in. Why should he bother continuing when there was no one left to live for?

A scary thought entered Garrett's mind, the kind of thought many don't experience in their entire lives, lives that were even longer than his. He'd probably had the thought more often than any person would want to believe a person could have it, yet he was still here. He'd stayed for his parents' emotional states, for the fear of being a number or statistic, and because he didn't want to traumatize anyone with being the one to find his bloated corpse in a tub or in bed blue in the face or strung up with a bent neck and eyes rolled back.

He didn't want to die with these on his conscience, but now he didn't have to. No one was left to mourn him. No one was left to write a perfunctory news story about him. No one was left to find him. So what's to stop him from finally, *finally*, ending his own suffering?

He sat up at this, the movement jostling the dozens of full pill bottles stashed in his clothes. He looked down, and slowly, he lifted a bottle out of the pocket of his winter coat. It fit in his palm well; he knew if his gloves were off it'd feel cold and smooth in his hands like a gun might. He observed the label a last time and quadruple checked it was *his* medicine, though the kind wasn't of any importance anymore. Looking around, he yelled for someone— anyone— to reply.

A final call for a help, a final chance for the universe to stop fucking with him before he did the irreversible.

No one answered. Not a person, not a god, not even a damned dog. So when he looked back to the bottle in his hand, the cap was off. He closed his eyes, and the next time he'd looked at the bottle, it was empty and his mouth felt chalky and dry. Then, Garrett laid down on that sidewalk in front of the broken windows and outdated Redbox and watched the sky as he waited to be relieved.

The temperature had been bothering him the entire time he'd been outside, though he hadn't realized his coat wasn't doing a good job keeping him warm until he was suddenly at ease with the cold, not able to tell that it was below 30° outside anymore. He figured that could be attributed to the drop in body temperature he was sure his body was experiencing. He closed his eyes, the ghost of a smile crossing his lips.

Finally, relief.