

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 . . .

Silence

by **Pilar Garcia**

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Chicago, Illinois.

With a population of just under three million, it's no wonder silence seems to be elusive to every person that lines the street with their presence, bustling shoes rummaging across sidewalks covered in sheets of frozen glass, beloved pet dogs cracking dead grass over the frozen morning dew, and the rumbling of the train from the brown line, only a few blocks away. Like clockwork, the train passes by every fifteen minutes from six to ten, causing a tremor in the apartment building the landlord noted for its "proximity to public transportation." The cars outside are endless— Boystown has always been a popular piece of the city, from the authentic Chicago-style pizza to the Walgreens corner store with the fake marble pillars adding to the decorum of seasonal flu shot posters lining the outside of the storefront.

Every morning at five-fifteen, without fail, the downstairs neighbor plays news stories at the loudest setting his television can manage. How both the ceilings and the floors can be so thin simultaneously, there isn't a clue. As the rent is only 600 bucks a month, there isn't much to complain about since there's a little money to spare to spend on some more upscale earplugs.

This morning, however, was different. Despite the earplugs, it was not the blaring television of Republican news that awoke the tenant of the first-floor apartment but the sun. Rarely had they ever been a victim of the sun's blinding rays, as they were constantly forced awake by the force of a thousand passengers aboard the Windy City's public transport system, or at very least, the sound of the upstairs neighbor's cat destroying the carpet in the corner of the room.

As the tenant lazily blinked their eyes awake and pulled the protection from their waxy ears, there was something they hadn't heard in three years, at least—

Silence.

Eyes shifted from the corner of their couch to the other, admiring the rays of sunshine peering in from the sheer curtains, the only kind allowed according to their lease agreement. Maybe, the downstairs neighbor had decided to sleep in. Maybe, the upstairs cat decided to use his scratching post for once. The tenant hummed softly as they rose, the floor creaking steadily under the surprising weight as they wavered to the window, taking a delicate finger and pulling the curtain away from the frosted glass. No children

out to school, no loud laughter of them tossing falling snow in each other's faces, no Uber drivers collecting their passengers from the corner of the street.

No dogs being walked, no humans being walked by their dogs, and no cars blaring at each other for moving too fast, too slow, or for simply existing too near to a Tesla. For once, in Chicago, on a bright, chilled Tuesday morning, there was nothing.

Brown eyes narrowed at the unfamiliar sight, the stillness of the roads and the apartments with the lights off despite the time of day, yet the tenant could only describe the ambiance of the city as one thing: strange.

Shifting from their pajamas to their day clothes, the tenant shimmied into their winter coat and slid their deep-grooved boots onto their dark patterned socks. Dark hair flittered past their shoulders as they brushed their apartment door out of their way, listening to it close behind them with a melodic creak amidst the chilled November air. A fear they weren't aware they had crept into the corner of their mind as the wind was the only movement in the air; a stillness fell over the city like a frosty blanket, the snow on the sidewalks undisturbed by shovels or heavily booted feet.

Crunch, crunch. The sound beneath their boots grew louder and louder as they traversed the empty streets, passing storefronts with no open signs lit and bus stop with benches that wouldn't be used for the time being. Only the traffic lights changed ever so slightly. Not urgently, but silently and steady, just as it usually would save for the cars angrily honking at each other as sedans changed lanes without turn signals.

Would yelling change much of anything?

The tenant didn't think so as they continued their trek towards the brown line, only furthering themselves towards the lakes. Strange to imagine how everyone had disappeared, all at once. They found themselves silently hoping for a birthday surprise from the entire city. That they would keep walking and walking until they reached the end of the road, and children, dogs, strangers, and acquaintances would jump out and scream their name in celebration. Only, the tenant wasn't familiar with enough people to warrant this, and their birthday wasn't for another few months.

But one can dream it would be that simple.

Litter would occasionally pass by on their trek; fliers from concerts two nights ago and ticket stubs from events he had never heard of, only passing them by on the empty sidewalk, adjacent to the deserted streets with a few cars parked on the side of the road. Expired timers with no tickets, they noted but did not add any spare change to their time limit.

They passed more storefronts now, an old theatre they had been to on the weekends, an old bus stop they had used only briefly, and an empty CTA bus with the lights turned off.

Silence dripped from their ears and fell onto the sidewalk as their steps felt heavier and heavier across the freshly fallen snow. For once, sleet did not bother them as they treaded black ice and cracked sidewalks until their eyes met the edge of Lake Michigan.

They ran.

As fast as their snow-covered boots could carry them, they ran. Across litter and sleet, past deserted storefronts, dying grass, and broken whiskey bottles lined the sidewalk. With the edge of the sidewalk, they met the frozen metal fencepost that was meant to hinder them from coming closer, but they scrambled over the metal with frozen pink hands and shaking breaths as their body fell over the railing and into the snow. Past the artificial beach with the horrid sand and closer to the water, closer to the edge of the lake with the ice chips cascading down in sheets, landing in the body of the water with tiny *plops*.

“You remembered,” She whispered, but they did not remember anything at all.

Their body sank into the lake, wading further and further into the body of water as their boots filled with frozen liquid and their shirt pulled them farther below the water, their head bobbing like a buoy as their lung begged for air, to stay afloat, to continue to live, even if they had to survive on their own.

Her hands reached from the depths of the lake to embrace the tenant, the frame of their body comforted by the tendrils of dark mass that tugged their body below the surface as her voice surrounded them; her voice which murmured warm summer breaths into their ear and neck, the same lips that trailed against their back and spine and forced them to tremble with pleasure and fear.

They could see her now, just barely through the whispers of the water, their drowning lungs, and their waterlogged feet. Her mossy hair and bright eyes glinted through the darkness of the lake and tugged them further, deeper, into her depths.

“*Home*, you’re home,” She beamed as she wrapped around their body, pulling their torso further and further down into her, the warmth of her embrace causing their eyes to flutter shut as her tendrils speared their limbs, pulling them so close that they could be mistaken as one.

Remember.

Bubbles filled their lungs, but they did not scream, nor did they struggle against her grasp. This was something they had promised, after all, after the first time they had plunged into her waters, and she had saved them.

“You should not make contracts with lake witches,” was not common knowledge to them before moving to the North, yet it seemed no one else was aware of her presence beneath the waves. Her home, she called it, when she had saved them all those years ago— her smile drawn like a zipper to her cheeks as she skimmed the surface, pushing them further and further until they could finally breathe again.

But not this time.

Last time, it was a nicety of hers that she had saved them from imminent doom, from their actions against humanity, but now, on this chilled day, they would take her place below the waters.

“I want to be human,” She had murmured against their lips, *“Will you make me a promise?”*

If only they had said no, and they, the witch and the outcast, both had died alone in those waves. If only that were the case, but they knew better than to expect anything else. Her chiming laughter filled their ears as she pressed against them, further and further until they genuinely were one, the coldness that entered their heart caused them to tremble and freeze beneath the waves until their body had passed onto her.

“My body is yours,” they murmured for the last time, “This body is mine,” she spoke for them, reaching up to feel her cheeks.