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## Silence

**T**HREE WEEKS AGO my roommate, Monica, walked into Robert's antique shop two blocks north of our apartment. They fell in love and on that same evening they drank wine and made love on my living-room carpet.

You may wonder how I know about the wine and kisses. I was there. We have a large mirror which hangs on our living-room wall. I was stretched out in my hammock on our back balcony. When I look up from where I sit in the hammock, I can see the mirror through the back balcony window and when I look into the mirror, I see what goes on in the living-room.

That evening, I was reading the entertainment section of the newspaper. I looked up at the mirror and I saw Monica and Robert making love. I tried to keep my eyes on the newspaper but I couldn't. I didn't. Monica's long brown hair was brushed forward, hiding her small breasts. Her face was flushed from the wine and from the heat in the room. They fell hopelessly in love. I watched. They touched. I felt pleasure watching them.

On the second night Monica and Robert are more comfortable around each other. Monica's arms are wrapped around Robert's waist. They are relaxed. They kiss and lick each other on the neck while keeping a gentle smile on their faces, not the kind of smile you see on people's faces after they have heard a joke, a funny joke, and not the friendly smile people have when they cross acquaintances on the street.

“Ah, it’s been so long,” says Robert. Their bodies glue together. There is never an awkward move. I have never felt what I am witnessing.

On the third night, I watch again, but this time I want to spend the evening in the living-room by the reading lamp. Spend an evening alone in the apartment. I’m happy to see Monica happy. Last year, she was involved with Eric, a local musician who often played with his band called ZORN at the Tunnel Café where Monica worked part-time as a waitress, but Eric had another lover, and he only spent part of his time with Monica.

All Robert wants out of life is to love someone. I heard him say that to Monica the other night.

I try not to disturb the lovers. I am quiet. I try to make myself invisible. To them I am invisible.

Fifth night in my hammock. It is raining. I leave the hammock to get myself a drink of spring water from the refrigerator. I have to walk through the living-room to get to the kitchen. They hear my footsteps and they quickly sit up. The kitchen is off the living-room. I’m close to them. So close. I walk lightly. I feel guilty for having upset the lovers. I take my glass of spring water back to the hammock. The hammock squeaks when I get into it. I settle, and the squeaks stop. The lovers settle back onto the living-room carpet. They make love again. I watch and the rain keeps drumming onto the sidewalk.

Monica lights a candle and turns off the light. She licks Robert’s neck again. She curls her body into the shape of a foetus and Robert wraps his large body around hers and they rock, gently. He bites her shoulder. She pinches his belly. He tickles her waist.

I should have made plans to go away on my summer holidays, but I can’t afford to go anywhere. I may get a raise at the Art Gallery. All of those long hours at the reception desk, and never did I complain that I was overworked. Why did I choose these three weeks of all weeks to be on holiday? I have read about this type of passionate behaviour before and I have seen many movies with love scenes in them, but somewhere inside me, I am always

aware that I am watching a movie and that the lovers who are making love on the screen are actors who have no passion for one another off the screen. I look into Monica's and Robert's eyes and I wonder whether they are capable of living without each other. Romeo and Juliet couldn't and died.

In three nights I learn that it is possible to be that much in love. After my discovery, I lie in my hammock, bored.

Every morning when Robert leaves our apartment to open his antique shop for the day, or for part of it anyway, Monica knocks twice on my bedroom door, walks in, sits on my bed and tells me how in love she is with Robert. Robert this and Robert that. But she doesn't have to tell me a thing because I hear everything they say. I have seen how she holds him. I can almost hear her heartbeat when he walks through the front door. Sometimes when Monica talks to me, I finish her sentences for her, in my head. I sit on my bed and stare out my bedroom window onto the street while Monica talks to me. She stopped coming into my bedroom. She stopped talking to me. There was no escape from the lovers. I had to do something. I went to the drugstore and bought a pair of earplugs. I get home, unwrap the earplugs and put them in my ears. All I hear now is a peaceful hum, the sound a seashell makes when held to the ear.

Now that I have earplugs, the lovers moan without interrupting me, but I can't hear the phone ring either. When Monica and Robert leave the apartment, I don't hear the door close behind them. If they talk to me (which is, by the way, something they haven't done yet), they might think I am a snob for not responding, or worse, angry with them, which isn't the case at all.

Today is my third day wearing earplugs. I couldn't hear the birds singing this morning and I missed the church bells on Sunday. Yesterday, I spent most of the day in my bedroom reading a book called *Food, A Consuming Passion*. The smell of smoke slipped through my bedroom window. I thought the neighbours were barbecuing steaks on their balcony. After a moment, I was again absorbed in my book. I went to the corner store today to buy milk. I noticed that an apartment near the corner store had burnt down. If I had heard police and fire-truck sirens yesterday while I was read-



ing in my bedroom, I would have looked out my bedroom window and seen a fire on my street. This is all very disturbing.

I pull out my earplugs from both ears every morning before I shower. The sound of water is unbearably loud. When I close my eyes, I imagine that I'm standing inches away from a giant waterfall. My ears can't take the noise for very long. They ache and I hurry to finish my shower. But before plugging my ears up again, I clean them. What would happen if I stopped cleaning my ears? If I allowed wax to build inside my ears, would I become deaf? Would I still need to wear earplugs?

Eighth day wearing earplugs. My ears begin to hurt. With or without earplugs, my ears hurt. Monica, Robert and the cat, I mustn't forget the cat, live with a deaf person but they haven't noticed yet. Today, I watched television for a few minutes and invented my own dialogue. On the tube I saw a man and a woman on a bed kissing. The man unbuttoned the woman's pajama top and discovered a bright red hickey on her neck. He jumps out of bed and says, "Who is he? Do you love him? Answer me!" She answers him. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way.... I don't know what he means to me yet, but I do know that I want to continue seeing him." These are the words I made up while watching images on the tube. I'm sure I came close to what was really said.

I switch the OFF button. I miss listening to music. I put organ music on my cassette player. I watch the tape slowly unwind. I turn the volume to maximum. My speakers are very small and they hardly vibrate. I watch the tape but I don't feel the music.

Nine days wearing earplugs. I thought of taking a sign-language course. I would like to communicate with those who have been born deaf. How many deaf people would kill to have my healthy ears? Most people feel sorry for those who are born deaf. People who wear earplugs for no apparent reason are crazy.

I have an infection in my right ear.

I look out of my bedroom window. It is a sunny day. There is a peaceful feeling around me. I go for a walk. I walk slowly. The people I pass on the streets are moving faster than me. I have not

used my voice and ears for ten days. The landscape around me is bright in colour. My sense of smell is sharp. I walk by a bakery and I can't resist entering. I buy a fresh palm leaf. The baker and his wife are standing behind the counter arguing about something. I get my first impulse to take the earplugs out of my ears but I don't. I want to know what they are arguing about. On my way back to the apartment, I count doorknobs. I notice that there are a variety of shapes and colours. Some are more practical than others. Some are on doors simply as ornaments. When I arrive at the front steps of my apartment, I stop and decide to sit for a while. An elderly woman sits in her rocking chair on her balcony across the street. Our eyes meet. She smiles. I don't smile back. She rocks in her chair and watches people walk by on the street. When the streets are empty, she stares into space. What's on her mind? Is she thinking about space? Her grandchildren? Her dead husband? Or is she not thinking anything at all? She is alone. She must hear the trucks drive by and the children play on the street but she ignores them. Maybe she can't hear. I think she is waiting to die. I want to take my earplugs out and talk to the old woman across the street, but instead I walk into the apartment and I see Monica and Robert in the living-room curled up on the carpet. They don't see me. I walk through the living-room to my bedroom. I close my door. I look at my bedroom walls. I stare at an abstract painting I did several years ago. There are five different blues in this painting. I could never figure out what I had painted. I look again. I see curves. I see a shape which resembles a woman's body. The woman seems to be holding something. Flowers. I see a male figure standing behind her kissing her shoulder. They are both nude. I see lips, her lips. She is smiling. A woman, a man and flowers. That's what I painted.

I fell in love once a long time ago. I think it was love because I was hurt inside. I was fifteen. He was an older man about thirty-five. My next door neighbour. I would visit him on Saturday mornings. He'd tell me stories about his trips to Europe and South Africa. I hadn't been anywhere except for Miami once with my family to visit my aunt and uncle who left Québec several years ago to get away from the cold winters. Louis worked as a dance critic for our local newspaper. Early on Saturday mornings, I would prepare to meet Louis. Saturday was the only day I wore lipstick, mascara and my one and only pair of earrings. Then, I would read his review of that week, just in case. He never did talk about his

reviews and I never commented on them because I didn't think that I could add anything to them. I hadn't been to any of the dance performances he reviewed. I had no money of my own. So, on Saturdays at eleven o'clock I would wait for Louis at his doorstep. He invited me into his home several times, but I kept saying no, even though I had an unbearable desire to say yes. I would listen to his soft, melodic voice and nod. Ask questions if there was something I didn't understand or wanted to know more about. Everything he said seemed so right, so intelligent. One evening, after dinner, I was washing dishes at the kitchen sink. Through the kitchen window above the sink, I saw Louis walk up to his front door. His arm was wrapped around a beautiful blonde woman's waist. She looked about his age or a bit older. I never went back to his house and he never came over to my parents' home looking for me. A month later he moved away. Probably to live with his beautiful blonde girlfriend. I thought of sending him letters declaring my love for him. If he knew I loved him, maybe he would come back. But how could he fall in love with a fifteen-year-old? I hated myself for being young. I hated myself for being in love. I hated love.

I chose to lock the world out of my life for fourteen days in a row. I developed peculiar habits. Some would have said that I had gone mad. I sank deep into my inner world, where thoughts took on meanings I had never contemplated before. I stepped back and the world stepped back. I was silent while everyone else responded. I listened to my blood move and heart beat inside my body. When I looked into other people's eyes, I saw through them. I stopped looking. I thought about what it would be like to be dead. Would it be like being deaf and blind? No. I wouldn't have my dreams.

On day fifteen, I take my earplugs out. I have infections in both ears. Things have changed inside. I slide my favourite music into my tape deck. My ears hear creaks from my wooden floor. My neighbour's bedsprings, the wind blowing through my bedroom window, the cat nibbling at her Tender Vittles. When cars drive by my window, I can tell whether the motor I hear is the make of a Saab, Volkswagen, BMW. I close my eyes, and hear Monica moan, a very sweet moan. My apartment is alive.