

BLISSFUL SILENCE*

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It was mid-July, and Theodore, whom his friends called Ted, was tired. Dark circles had made a permanent residence under his eyes; his muscles ached so much that walking to pick up the morning paper was a challenge; his voice strained with merely answering the telephone and made him sound like a life-long smoker, though he had never taken a puff. The hardships he endured over the past few years would have been enough to do him in completely, if they hadn't been put to a stop a few weeks ago. Today, finally, Ted would celebrate some blissful silence and put his mind and body to rest, even for only a few hours.

He was uneasy, at first, leaving little Nell at the Johnson's; after all, a five-year-old's first party is a big deal. He was a little hurt, actually, that Nell had so easily left his side. Practically as soon as he had parked the mini-van, Nell was unbuckled and jumping out the door.

"Don't worry, Ted," Nicole Johnson assured him, "the girls will have a great time. It's only a few hours."

"Thanks," Ted replied, "I guess I'm just nervous about leaving her, you know, after everything..."

Nicole reached out and touched his arm. There was always something so comforting about being around her. "I know," she said. She pulled him away from the crowd and leaned in close to him. Her blond hair just barely grazed his nose; she smelled like a tropical vacation.

"Listen" she said, "Your wife is getting help. Besides, I've got a whole new security system installed, with surveillance video and everything. Besides, look at me!" Nicole spun around on her toes. "I'm good as new! Maybe even better," she said as she flung her arms in the air, the bandages barely visible underneath the pink flowers of her sundress. "Just a little nick in the ribs," she said, smiling. Ted huffed. Nicole was much too easy going and it worried him.

"C'mon...lighten up," she said as she playfully slapped his shoulder, "I'm still a sexy, single, ready-to-mingle soccer mom."

Ted had to laugh. Nicole always had the most positive outlook on life, even after suffering a serious trauma. Actually, he wished he could be like her.

"Now go," she said, "you deserve some time off. Go relax at your parents'. Maybe even take a nap for once in your life!"

Ted smirked at that. He had always complained about how he missed the "good ole' days" of afternoon naps. And he desperately needed one.

“You’re right,” Ted said. “I’ll be back at five.” He began to scan the backyard for Nell so he could say goodbye. Children were running in every direction, some making bubbles, some with balloons, some flapping their arms like giant birds. Suddenly he felt something grab his legs and he fell to the ground.

“Dad!” shouted little Nell, laughing at how easily she had knocked over her father.

Ted breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, honey, there you are. I’m leaving, okay? I’ll be right down the street at Grandma and Grandpa’s if you need me, okay?”

“I love you Daddy,” said little Nell. No other words would ever mean as much.

“I love you too, sweetheart. You have a good time.” He kissed his daughter and stood up. “I’ll be back in a few hours, okay?”

“Okay!” shouted Nell, and she ran off towards the swing set.

When Ted arrived at his parents’ house, which was only 10 minutes from the Johnson’s, as opposed to the 45 minutes to his loft apartment, he was relieved. His parents were gone all day golfing, which would leave him some peace and quiet for that much-needed nap. As much as he loved his folks, they did not understand when it came to rest. In their opinion, playing three hours of cribbage *was* resting. He had to give them credit for one thing, though; they were the most loving and supportive parents a guy could ask for. They had saved his ass a few times when he was having trouble with Lucy, offering to look after Nell as long as he needed. He didn’t like leaving Nell, but at the time, he had no choice. He couldn’t risk having Lucy near their daughter.

It wasn’t that Lucy was a bad mom. She always had good intentions. The day they took Nell home from the hospital, he wrapped his arms around her as they looked in to the crib, feeling utterly mesmerized and full of hope for their one beautiful baby girl.

“You think we’ll do right by her, Ted?” Lucy asked him in a whisper.

“I know we will,” he whispered back into her ear, “she has two teachers for parents.” He chuckled, and Lucy turned her neck to kiss him.

The two had fallen in love during their undergraduate studies at the University of New Hampshire. Ted remembered the day he arrived in EDUC400 – Exploring Education – and initially panicked, thinking that there would be no seat for him (even though he arrived at precisely 8:30, which was when the class started). Then, as if two strokes of luck could collide in one day, there was an open seat next to the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Her name was Lucy, and they clicked instantly. She offered to take notes for him in his absence, and vice versa. They even began studying together during the week, which, as Ted is always quick to remind her, became the more clichéd “studying” within two weeks of the course - books strewn across the floor and lips locked in perfect chemistry. Within the next four weeks, he confessed that he loved her, and she didn’t run away. He married her four years later, one month after graduation.

But Lucy, like most of the women Ted had dated, had a scary side. Except hers wasn't that she was way too into "The Beatles" or the color pink or even S&M (it would take a lot to surpass *that* girlfriend's demons); it was something more concrete, and, as Ted was too scared to admit until about six months ago, much more alarming.

Ted shook his head as he walked up the front steps and turned his key in the door. The house was nice. The outside had a pleasant combination of siding and stone, two stories, and a beautiful porch with white pillars that wrapped half the house. The house was about five minutes from any main road and was perched atop a long, winding driveway. A perfect setting for a Saturday afternoon siesta.

Ted had grown accustomed to smelling raspberries or pomegranates when he walked into his parents' house. They were his mother's favorite scents of air fresheners, the kind that sits on a table and you lift up the plastic cone as needed. Today, he noticed, he smelled neither. As he kicked off his old New Balance sneakers, he looked around for the air freshener. Sure enough, there it was sitting on a nearby end-table, bone-dry. He would have to remember to bring her a new one. Still, he thought, something felt odd. Did they move some furniture around? Didn't look like it. It must be the air, he thought, or I need that nap a lot more than I thought.

Ted stood in the living room and looked around. Photos of him, his brother Dan, and baby pictures of Nell cluttered the walls. The paisley couch remained protected under a plastic cover, and the reliable jar of Hershey's kisses acted as the centerpiece of the coffee table. He could see the refrigerator beckoning him through the entrance into the kitchen. Ted crossed over to the coffee table and clicked the remote for the TV. He thought he would have some tea, watch a little TV and unwind, then take that nap. He let the TV kick on and crossed the threshold into the kitchen. He remembered helping his dad renovate the cabinets – the beautiful oak was still in mint condition, and best of all, well-stocked. Ted opened the miniature ceramic house on the counter labeled "tea" and selected a vanilla-chai packet. As he began to fill the tea kettle, however, a foul stench passed beneath his nose. He looked around for the source – nothing in the sink, the trash was nearly empty, and nothing appeared to be rotting in the fridge. His parents kept their home immaculate. He couldn't quite identify it, but it smelled vaguely like rotting vegetables; but, he told himself, he had checked the fridge and the counters. Must be his imagination.

Ted's imagination frequently ran rampant. The past five years had taught him that things aren't always what they seem or what you want them to be – even things you love. Because of the trauma of his fallout with Lucy, he had taken to having nightmares as well as daymares – if that's a thing – in which he saw her staring at him, playing with her wavy brown hair and smiling at him. But then as he began to smile back at her, her grin became crazed and she pulled out a knife she'd been hiding behind her back. This was all just imagination, he knew. Besides, he told himself, she was miles away and was not getting out of that place any time soon. And when she does, she'll be better. The crazy will be washed out of her, and then maybe they could be a family again. Maybe.

Ted was about to turn on the gas stove when he began to hear a news anchor in the other room. He walked back over to the coffee table, but just before he changed the channel, a breaking news story caught his attention.

“Breaking news here at *Action News at Three*,” the lead anchor woman was saying. “This morning, three women escaped from the Bridgewater State Women’s Hospital for the criminally insane. Officials are not saying how this occurred; only that a guard was killed in the process. Gary Holland has the story. Gary?”

“Thanks, Mallory,” Gary said to the camera, “I’m here in front of the Bridgewater State Women’s Hospital in Bridgewater, Mass., where three convicted felons escaped early this morning. Two of the women - officials are not releasing names - were apprehended a few miles down the road about an hour ago. There is a third woman still on the loose, and suspected to be armed. Police are advising all communities in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont to be under community watch. The woman...”

Ted did not need to hear any more, or look at the photo of the woman on the TV screen. For as soon as he heard Mallory begin speaking, he realized why he thought the house felt different and what that foul smell was. It was cucumber melon lotion. How could he not have distinguished it? He had always complained to Lucy that it smelled like she was rubbing vomit all over her body. Only Lucy would demand that she have that lotion, even in a hospital. Ted stood between the coffee table and the couch, his feet planted in cement and his body too frozen to even consider sitting down.

He felt something on his back – something small, cold, and metal.

“Not bad, eh, Ted?” he heard Lucy say behind him. Her voice was like ice. “I think I look damn good in that photo. I thought I might find you here,” she said, removing the gun from his back and walking around the couch. The click of her high heels got louder with each step.

Ted, still unable to move his feet, looked at his wife. She had on a skimpy bright red dress and black peep-toe stilettos. She had on bright red lipstick and her hair was in a messy bun on the top of her head. She looked smokin’, he noticed, even now.

“Hi honey,” Ted said, his voice barely audible.

“Don’t,” Lucy said, rushing towards him and pushing him down on the couch, “‘hi honey’ me, you ass!”

Ted’s forehead was perspiring now. He was not a guy who liked confrontation, and had been dreading a confrontation like this ever since Lucy got sick.

“Lucy,” he managed to utter, “listen to me.”

“No. No,” she said, breathing heavily and pacing in front of him. “You listen to me. It’s my turn now.”

Ted sat on the couch dumbfounded. Suddenly he could feel a weight like a ton of bricks sitting just inside his pocket. It was his cell phone. He dared not reach for it. Maybe, though, if he could shift his weight on it in just the right way...

“So!” Lucy shouted, shoving her face into Ted’s neck, seemingly sniffing for something. “Where is he?”

“Where is...who, Lucy?”

Suddenly Lucy’s palm flew at him, slapping him across the face. It stung, but he did not react. The doctors had said it was always best just to let her be. To not do anything rash. So he continued to sit and wait for what she would do next.

“Do you think I’m an idiot, Ted? You do, don’t you? Why else, hmm, would you have let those... *people*... take me?” she paused, then laughed. Softly, at first, then one big “ha!” to the ceiling, as if telling off someone else entirely.

“Lucy, sweetheart,” Ted said, trying his best to speak in calm, even voice, “I would never think of you as an idiot.”

“Really? Well then. Tell. Me. Where. My. Son. Is,” she demanded, staring into his eyes with an unrelenting fire.

It’s gotten worse, Ted thought. He gulped, unsure of what his next move could possibly be. To tell her the truth would surely be detrimental to his life; to lie to her would surely make it worse.

“He’s right upstairs. He’s... taking a nap,” Ted uttered. Perhaps if he could get her out of the room, he could call for help.

“Get up,” she said, pointing the gun at him once again. “Take me to him.”

Ted got up, being careful not to make any sudden movements, stood from the couch and kept his eye on his wife.

“No funny business now,” she said, “Move it.”

As he was turning away from her, he brushed his hand against his pocket. The keypad of his cell was facing out. All he needed to hit was three buttons – unlock, 9 (his pre-set speed dial for 911, which he had programmed for the one-percent chance of something like this happening), and send. As Ted lifted his right leg for the first step, he pushed his fingers down on his pocket and felt for the central button. He had no way of knowing if it had worked, but he continued to hope. He took four steps up then felt again, this time for number 9. He was just pressing down when –

“Stop,” Lucy said, “What’s with your pockets?”

“Nothing,” Ted replied. He lifted his hands up in surrender. It was over. She was going to find his cell phone.

Suddenly he had a thought. It was something that used to pull Lucy out of her spells, before she had taken a turn for the worse. He always felt ridiculous doing it and was skeptical of the whole thing, but today was his one last hope. He took a deep breath, and began to sing.

“Spend all your time waiting...for that second chance. For a break that would make it okay...”

Lucy lowered the gun. Ted lowered his hands and turned to face her. She stepped up on the step beside him.

He continued to sing. *“There’s always some reason...to feel not good enough...”*

Lucy chimed in, and for one minute, they were like Sonny and Cher, just sharing a moment through some classic Sarah McLachlin. *“But it’s hard at the end of the day, need some distraction...”*

Lucy let her arm holding the gun dangle at her side. She belted out, *“ooh, beautiful release...”*

She stopped. She seemed puzzled.

Ted tried to help her: *“Memories seep from my veins...”* He hoped that she would continue singing; it seemed to be working. But she didn’t. He could see her eyes were filling with water and she was looking around; she started tugging at her messy bun. Ted turned to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. They sat on the steps.

Lucy stuttered, “I...I used to sing that song...”

Ted took a deep breath. “Lucy, darling,” he said, “We do not have a son.”

Lucy looked over at him, allowing one tear to escape and roll down her cheek. Ted put his arm around her.

“We do not have a son,” Ted repeated, speaking very slowly now, “We were going to. We lost him. During delivery, his umbilical cord was tangled around his neck. The doctors tried to release him; they tried as hard as if he were their own kid. But the cord was looped around his little neck five times...He just couldn’t make it.”

At first, Lucy just sat there, staring at the steps below them. Then her knees started bouncing and she shook her body back and forth.

“But Lucy, there was another baby. We had twins. We have a beautiful, healthy little girl. Everything is going to be fine.”

“No,” she kept saying, until finally she jumped up and slapped him again. “Liar!” she snapped and began running up the stairs again. Perhaps now was his chance to flee, but it was too risky. What if she were gone by the time the cops showed up? What if she went back to Nicole’s, or tried to kidnap Nell? He couldn’t risk that possibility. Instinctively he reached out his arms and caught Lucy around the waist.

“Lucy, this isn’t even our home. This is my parent’s house. Remember? We don’t live here!” Lucy was struggling to break free. She leaned over and sunk her teeth into Ted’s arm. Ted cried out in pain, and Lucy began up the stairs.

“He’s not here! He doesn’t exist!” Ted yelled and ran after her. When he found her, she was staring at an empty twin bed – Ted’s childhood bedroom. Ted’s parents had preserved it in all its glory – race cars lined up on the book shelf, glow-in-the-dark stars along the walls and across the ceiling, and a poster of a man stepping on the moon.

“This,” he heaved, “is my old bedroom, Lucy.”

“Why do you continue to lie to me, Ted? I know the truth now. I’m staring at it. This is our son’s room. I don’t know why you want to hide him from me.” Lucy’s voice had taken on a monotonous quality, as if she were simply reading words on a page. The gun still lay limp in her hand. “It’s that bimbo, isn’t it? Nicole,” She said the name as if it were a disease. “She’s the one you want to raise a family with. It was never me. You gave that bitch my kid.” She spun on him. “You gave that bitch my kid. I. Want. Him. Back.”

Ted felt a pang of guilt as she said these words. It was true that he had feelings for Nicole, but they only surfaced after he had accepted the fact that Lucy was sick and was not getting better. Lucy had become suspicious of every woman who talked to Ted or even looked at him, eventually going so far as to demand that she be the only woman he spoke to. Unfortunately, Nicole got the brunt of her jealousy. And yet Nicole had been – still was – a true friend through it all. Was it so wrong for him to see a future with her now? She was great with Nell, beautiful, smart, funny...but these thoughts were ludicrous. She would never want to be with him anyway.

“Lucy, Nicole and I are just friends, you know that,” he said. “You’ve thought this before. You attacked her. Don’t you remember? You broke into her house, Lucy. You were looking for your son, but you didn’t find him, and you attacked Nicole with a knife. She had to go to the hospital. Do you remember, Lucy? Do you?”

“Shut up!” She spun around to him.

“Lucy, Lucy, baby, you have to listen to me. We don’t have a son. But there is a chance for us to be happy. We were once. After a while, you saw that you could love little Nell just as much.” He was pleading with her. “You took a mother-daughter dance class with her, do you remember? You were happy. We were going to give her all the love she deserved, and all the love that her brother deserved, combined. Listen to me Lucy, baby, please. We don’t have a son. But we do have –“

“I said, shut up!” She shoved the gun into his chest and began pushing him out of the room towards the top of the stairs. “I’m going to kill you,” she said, “And then I’m going to kill her, and then I’m going to take my son, and we are going to leave here.”

In one terrifying swoop, she lifted her high heel and kicked Ted in the stomach, sending him flying down the stairs. After that, there was only darkness.

* * *

Ted awoke on the couch with an icepack on his forehead, a tissue stuck up his nose, and a bandage wrapping his entire stomach. He coughed and pulled out the tissue. It was soaked with blood. Hovering over him was a beautiful woman, someone he recognized.

“Nicole?” he stammered.

“Hey there,” Nicole said, “I got worried when you didn’t show to pick up Nellie. We left the house a little while ago and saw the police cars out front. Thank god you’re okay!” She cried and threw her arms around him.

“Ow!” He cried. His ribs were aching and he felt like there was a hammer continually pounding against his skull. *I must look like such a wuss*, he thought. “I mean, uh, thanks. That was really great of you.”

“Daddy?” Nell appeared from behind Nicole and knelt on the floor beside him. “Are you okay?”

“Hey kiddo. Yeah, Daddy’s great. Just a little bruised, that’s all.”

“Was it...Mommy?” she asked. She already knew way too much for a five-year-old. Ted then remembered everything. The smell and the news and Lucy. Pretty, confused old Lucy...with a gun. He tried to sit up to look for her, but as he did so, he felt like a knife in his ribs twisted and dug into him; he writhed in pain.

Nicole placed her hand on Ted’s shoulder. “It’s okay,” she said, “the police got her. They’re taking her back to Bridgewater as we speak.”

“But, wha-? How?” Ted questioned. Then he remembered – in their moment of duet, Ted had been able to finish dialing for 911. Aside from his current physical state, his plan had worked.

“They found this in the bathroom,” Nicole said, and held up what appeared to be a hospital gown, some white sneakers, and a tube of red lipstick. “They’re connecting Lucy to a shoplifting incident that also happened this morning at the Bridgewater Mall.”

Ted turned to his daughter. “Yes, it was Mommy, sweetheart. But she didn’t mean to hurt me. She’s just still a little bit confused. You remember, like we talked about? She just needs a little bit more time, that’s all,” he reached his fingers towards his daughter’s wavy brown pigtails. Nell leaned over and gave him a kiss.

Ted got up to answer a few questions and fill out some paperwork for the cops, but after that, he was more than happy to leave that house. He would call his parents and give them the heads up, but it

was no use sitting around for another two hours waiting for them. Besides, Nicole had offered to cook him and Nell dinner.

“Go ahead and wait in the car, honey. I’ll be right there,” he said to Nell. She obeyed and skipped out the door.

Ted thanked the police officers and walked over to his sneakers by the door. He shook his head, still in disbelief at what this day had turned out to be. His parents really would need to get that security system updated.

He stepped out the door, but just as he was about to lock it behind him, something stopped him. He stepped back in and glanced around. It wasn’t a thought, he realized, as much as a feeling. A deep uneasiness set inside him. Perhaps it was from the fall, perhaps from the exhaustion, perhaps just from seeing her again and allowing all the old memories to wash over him...whatever it was, he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. *Now I’m the one losing my mind*, Ted thought, and turned his back again to leave. Just as he did so, he heard it. A sound, ever so faint, was coming from upstairs. He took a step inside, and cocked his ear toward the ceiling.

The sound was unmistakable. It was the shrill, heart-wrenching sound of a baby crying.■

* The writing of this short story was inspired by a prompt given by Mr. Stephen King on page 172 in his novel, *On Writing*.

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