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Heart of Silence

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Author Bio

Jessica McManness is an English and Anthropology major with a deep and undying love for chai tea, koalas, *The Mummy*, JM Barrie, and Virginia Woolf.

Heart of Silence

8:16 a.m.

My feet touch down on hard concrete. The hills around my school are invisible now, the sight eaten away by the white fog of winter. Insistent chill shakes me and asks for more than I have to feed its fire. Surely, there's a spark of life that can burn through the ice of my thoughts. Kisses on my cheeks left by my only frosty suitors turn them to a rosy blush, so juxtaposed with the soft palpitations of my quiet heart.

Into the school and through the twisting halls I walk, last hopes hanging on my mind. It's March 28th. Maybe they remembered. We always remember. It's one of those things, you know? Something we make sure to do for each other. It shows we care.

I walk down the hall, trying not to look down too far, afraid of what I'll see—last minute doubts are creeping in. I think about this time last year. The distance. I look up a few feet away from my locker.

Empty.

There's a small sadness in my heart. But I try to brush it under. It's my birthday, after all.

Seventeen.

11:23 a.m.

I hate presenting. I hate speaking. I don't know why I can't get through it. Fear in its most base form pervades. My breath is lodged in my chest, short and shallow. *What's wrong with me?*

Calm yourself. Focus on your heartbeat. Slow it.

It gets worse.

If anything, it's now pounding out of my chest.

My face is burning, but I don't really blush. At least not in these moments, so no one can see. Oh God—I can't breathe. This isn't just a thought from a nervous mind.

No, this is physical.

My skin is hot. I stand jerkily. My entire body is shaking. I take a step forward and my knee almost slides right out from under me, along with my stomach. I get up to the front of the room, hold up the remote and point toward the screen, "Virginia Woolf experimented with stream of consciousness style, often leaving..."

I continue on, but I can't hear my own words. They're leaving my mouth, but I hardly know what I'm saying. I see faces and yet also nothing at all. I...

"Hon— Why are you laughing?" My teacher's voice is accompanied by silence.

What?

Her face comes into focus. And in it is all the contempt of my peers, everything I need to see. The open-mouthed, crooked smile. Furrowed brow, widened eyes. Incredulously confused, and with just a bit of unnecessary sauciness.

"I— Oh! I'm sorry... Um..."

I had no idea.

I do what I have to— anything and everything I can to take my seat again. I talk, answer questions. All the while fueled by survival instincts— a fierce drive to get back to my desk. The air is fast moving through my lungs, and I'm holding on tight to an old thread.

And finally it ends. I'm about to collapse. I walk back shaking. *Please don't look at me.* I can't stand it. *Please, please don't.*

I reach my chair and grip the back, slide it out, and sit. I realize it's not the safety net I had imagined. I gaze down at my lap and I can't stop the tears that come. I stay silent. There's no whimper. I can't let the girls sitting across from me, the girls sitting next to me, see them. I pretend to look in my bag on the ground and the tears fall straight down from my eyes, not even touching my cheeks. AKA, pro-job. But I can't hold this position forever.

I sit up. I continue to look down. The next presentation has started. And the girls see. I meet their eyes, and they all see the tears. They glance at each other and turn away, embarrassed. Who cares anyway? No one.

Should have expected that.

12:04 p.m.

I walk fast through the gym. The teacher looks at me for a long moment as I run through, but says nothing. Things are crashing and banging in my chest. My previous fear of people seeing me is replaced by...anger. I'm angry and sad and frustrated. And when they mix together, it's called pain. It's called hurt.

Everyone is talking amongst themselves, asking about this and that. The girls who look up when I come in keep looking at me, but ultimately turn away. One of the girls from the last group to leave, Shannon, comes over— I'm not quite done.

"Hey— when you come down, can you make sure to turn out the lights?"

I nod and look back down to tie my shoes.

"Yeah, of course."

They leave and I take a deep breath. I walk over to the mirror.

And grip the sink.

God. Fucking. Damn it.

Black trails of mascara cover the expanse of my cheeks and ring my eyes.

Whatever, it's over. I'm finished.

I shake my head and walk away.

3:08 p.m.

The tears won't stop now. I don't know why. My hands are shaking. I don't know why. Nothing bad is happening. I feel pretty lonely right now. The sky is a dark grey now. The fields and hills stretch out before me. I look up and I see Eva. One of my friends. I need her. I needed them.

And they're never there.

Ever.

And yet, I find myself wishing always, begging and pleading for them to ask me. To sit me down and say, I know you're not okay. Tell me what's going on. I'm here. I love you. I'll stay with you. I love you.

I think I might hate them a little, for not noticing. And yet in my mind

I'm asking this of them? Something's wrong here.

When our eyes meet she asks, "Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." *Ask me again.*

Please.

"K." And she left without another word.

Coldness.

I walk down the school's drive and move to step onto the wood bridge that crosses the creek when I notice something beside the icy bank. I bend down and pick up three rocks in various shades of obsidian. Their heaviness weighs in my hands as I examine them before transferring them into my coat pocket, where they settle at the bottom.

I walk across the creek and start for home.

4:30 p.m.

"How was your day, honey?"

I smile and turn away from my mother. Facing the kitchen hutch I widen my eyes and take a couple shallow breaths. Of course I'm fine. I reach up into the cabinet for a mug. I'm home now.

"It was fine, how was Michael today?"

She's a behavior specialist, she works with special needs kids. And she's good at what she does.

"A little rocky, he was biting again. It's hard because we do all of this training in the class, then in the home, I leave, and his mother doesn't continue with our plan. All of his progress regresses."

"Ick, I'm sorry... Have you talked to her about it?"

The conversation continues and softens me for just a bit. Brother and Sister come into the kitchen and pull out their homework. I sit at the table, mug of tea in hand. How can they be so content? What if they knew?

That would be awful, they can't ever know. I can't do that to them. Not to the only people in this entire world who love me despite utter uselessness.

"Jessie, can you read this for me?" Little brother is the cutest.

"Course."

And so I sit in my warm little kitchen, deceptively happy.

Only for you, my loves.

7:38 p.m.

"The morning light stretches across the sky and slowly turns from burnt red to dusky orange. I sit on the roof and watch the sun rise up over the flat desert that extends out past the horizon."

I pound away on the keys of my laptop. The sound is cathartic. Ritualized. I don't have to think about anything when I'm writing. Not myself. Not questions or worries, problems or... It's just this. On the page and nothing more.

"Last night Aisha fell asleep talking about the wedding, she and Collin's plans for their future home. I'll miss her."

The words ebb and flow, not necessarily right, but not necessarily wrong. Right now there's no need for either. I just write. And I keep on going. And for the moment, I let it take me where it will. Time passes. My body is at rest. All I see is sand and sky. And I just keep going. *I can do this, maybe*, a voice

whispers.

“Emotion chokes my throat, and I grab the broom from behind the corner and walk outside onto the pavement in front of the street. I work all of my anxieties and frustrations into sweeping the hell out of the browning concrete. I work my arms hard, driving the broom into the ground and flicking the dirt away with my tense wrist. A tear falls and I tell myself to keep going, until the dirt has been cleared away. Until I no longer feel it. Then I know I’ll be fine.”

Wait, what?

Confused and uneasy I look at the screen. Why is she so randomly upset? Aisha is... That’s not her. Her character is like...light. Embodied. Like clean air, and hope, and days spent in the sun. I look back in my writing to see why she’s upset, but there’s nothing there.

Brush it off, just fix it.

But further down, *“The broken edge of the mirror is as wet with the red of my blood as these hands. Did You ever think we’d know such pain?”*

My hands fall. My eyes stare. A thousand thoughts are flying through my head, but there’s only one my mind can offer.

I’m sorry I hurt you, Aisha.

9:45 p.m.

They say the demons come out at night, and here I find myself haunted. By something I can’t quite touch. I lie in my dark room, shadows painting the wall I face now. In my mind I bend them into shapes. Water, books—the things that brought me here. Myself. *Mea culpa.*

I’m alone in this world—and it’s my fault. And now, I’m so tired.

My mind plays out the story. I follow and wonder. Pictures fade in and out. A little girl at a lake, running through the woods with two others. The little girl dancing at a festival in autumn. The little girl reading *Peter Pan* under the bed sheets. The little girl exploring the creek and collecting her stones, throwing them back just as quickly.

The scene changes. The little girl in a new white house. The little girl in a small new school. The little girl turned third grade pariah. The little girl hit and punched. The little girl came home and cried. The little girl wanted to die.

I cry for her now. Her innocence gone in a blink. Children are everything good, and her loss was perverse.

And still I am affected.

The demons are out tonight.

They crawl over my skin, ripping and tearing at flesh from within. Hot breath in my ear burns through my mind and out through my eyes, till all I see are their terrible lies.

They tell me I’m worthless. They tell me I’m empty.

My body twists into stretched forms. As if to escape itself.

I hear the demons are out tonight.

11:32 p.m.

Tears roll down my face. I hold the shard of broken mirror in my hand. My heart is shrinking, getting smaller and lost in my chest. It’s hard to breathe again. I bow over my legs like a praying monk. Why does everything hurt so

much? *Did You ever think we'd know such pain?*

I gasp for breath, trying to find it in me. God, I'm sorry, but I hurt so much. Surely you didn't intend for this to happen? I feel so sick.

My dark room is cloaked in shadow, a haze seems to hang in the air. I can't see. My life pounds in my ears, it's like blood rushing, like a river. I can't hear, except for it. Watery dreams alight my vision, and its liquid haze feels right. Turbulent and frightful, deep and unseen, mysterious and terrifying. Things in my quietest of nightmares.

Cold touches my lips in the blue of the water. I'm not just in pain for the thoughts that have haunted me. It's this too. Because even now, I long for the light to rise. But the nights beg me to keep my silence.

I feel along my dresser for the smooth, glass jar and pop open the lid. I take out some of the smooth creek stones and slip them into my pockets. For luck? I'm not sure.

Their weight brings me back to the ground. The mirror glints. The haze becomes cloudy. And in my mind I hold the image of the creek from my childhood. A happy place, tinged with bittersweet nostalgia.

I think about my family as life thickens and thins. And I panic.

12:50 a.m.

The river rushes in my ears.

Dearest,

I feel certain I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be... I can't fight any longer... You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good... If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer...¹

Thank you for the happiness you gave me. Thank you. I love you. All of you.

4:00 a.m.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. My eyes open to stare at the ceiling. A thin white blanket covers me. And I find myself paralyzed. What have I done? Oh God. My inside shrinks in on itself, my breath comes out short. Ashamed by the selfishness that moved my actions. There's nothing but this thought: *God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*

The machine continues to beep, slow and steady, and I hear my mother's soft voice on the phone in the hall.

I focus on the ceiling.

It's March 29th now.

1 Woolf, Virginia. "Suicide Note". March 28, 1941.