

## When the Silence Settles

As we approach the frat-castle, my stained hands trace the black sharpie in my pocket—my voice, replaced by a two-dollar plastic tube filled with ink.

Up four termite-ridden stairs, we are stopped by a red Ralph-Lauren polo, collar fully popped, fitted like a wet suit. Beyond, an array of padded sweatshirts, leg warmers, and khaki shorts splashed in retro purples, teals, and pinks crowd the porch. They sip their red cups leisurely, enjoying the fresh air of a cool November night—an escape from the deafening bass leaking out from under the door.

"Who are you guys?" arms crossing condescendingly; I wait for the stressed stitching to snap and split the polo in two. I wonder how he landed the bouncer gig. Is he in an hourly rotation with the other brothers? Or is it a coveted position, won by the mightiest display of testosterone?

"I'm George. This is my friend Howard. He doesn't speak."

A pair of eyes locks onto my scrawny figure, noticeably taken aback, but trying to keep their cool. I stare back confidently, uselessly, silently.

### **Day 0: Tea for One**

The idea was born in Sarah's room over cold tea. The tea guided our conversation to yoga, which progressed to yogi's in the Himalayas, my desire to study with one, and finally to silent retreats.

"...Yeah, my friend went on one once. She said it was pretty intense. No talking for a whole weekend and a lot of meditation." She pulls her legs up onto the chair, her chin coming to rest on her knee.

"That sounds awesome" I say. "Like no talking to anyone?"

"Yeah, you're basically supposed to explore yourself and I guess you do that best within your own mind."

"That's it!" I jump up from the bed, forgetting the bunk above and tea resting by my foot. Skull meets wood; tea meets carpet.

"Fuck!" I rub my head and scrunch my face. "A vow of silence! That's it." I barely notice Sarah anymore. I realize this idea has been steeping way longer than this tea.

Back in high school, parties took up a lot of my time, like a drug that only gave bad trips. They were my escape from seriousness. I could never resist. What if I missed that epic brawl? Better to get fucked up than watch *Bridezilla* marathons with Mom. I would find myself an hour deep in Brooklyn, already dreading the drunken subway ride back to the Upper West Side. Often I would pass out heading home and wake to the shake of an MTA employee. "You in the Bronx honey, best you find your way home." I began to see parties not as liberation, but as prison, the same monotonous drunk act over and over again.

I could spend my time more productively. I could stay home, read, write, play piano and study. I could enjoy and improve *myself*.

One night, I stumbled across a TED talk on YouTube by Susan Cain titled: "The Power of Introverts." I watched as she explained how introverts are looked down upon by

society, how there is a bias within “our most important institutions, our schools and our workplaces. They are designed mostly for extroverts.” Western culture shuns the recluse who prefers a book to a round of beers. I was mesmerized as she said, “some of our transformative leaders in history have been introverts;” Einstein, Gandhi and Beethoven, proof “solitude is a crucial ingredient to creativity.”

It’s my last night with speech and I’m with Sarah—no tea this time.

I drop my bag and set the soft chocolate-chip cookie on the table. Sarah’s face lights up.

“Thanks! I’ve been craving one since I started working.” Her legs, propped up on a lime-green desk chair, fall to the ground as her hands grab the cookie.

The small study room is bright, a combination of LEDs above and gold carpet below. I pull up a chair opposite Sarah and heave my psych textbook from my bag to the table.

“I’m starting the vow tomorrow. I won’t be talking to you for a week.”

“Oh wow. Can I text you?”

“You can, I won’t respond though.”

“Well that’s no fun...Email?”

I laugh. “Gonna miss me Sarah?” I say playfully.

“Maybe a little...A week’s a long time. I’m not sure I would have the willpower.”

The rest of the cookie disappears into her mouth.

I think: *You don’t need willpower when you want something.*

### **Day 1: Silence is Golden.**

With ‘CANT SPEAK’ inscribed in black sharpie, my palm became my spokesperson. Everyone wanted more. “Why?” I shrug. “Are you sick?” Shrug. “Did you lose your voice?” I open my hands, shrug. “You’re weird.”

I notice all the small, insignificant interactions and courtesies. Someone holds the door, expecting a “Thank you.” I walk through without looking back. In the elevator: “What floor?” I nod awkwardly and punch four myself. A text from Layne: “Dinner?” I eat alone.

Ordering required a mutual trust between server and myself.

“What would you like?” A cute blonde girl asks, mechanically grabbing a green plate from the colorful stack. Her yellow Michigan hat is fitted too tightly to her head. I want to tell her to loosen it. Her sincere eyes meet my nervous ones.

I point to the mashed potatoes like an infant. I imagine my mom: “Use your words Howard”

She looks hesitant. “Is he mute?” I picture her wondering. No, I just want some potatoes...

She plops a scant spoonful onto the plate.

*Do I look that small? I’m a growing boy.*

I slide my tray down the metallic counter weakly. What looks like sloppy-joe is next. I look for the label but it’s missing from the holder. I stare at the mystery protein, look up at the girl and frown. How easy it would be to ask; three words: “Is that

vegetarian?” I sigh and give her the thumbs up. She hands me the plate. I guess I’ll settle for a salad.

Teeth brushed, I sit in the dorm hallway absorbed in my nightly journal. I flow without a filter, unlike my formal writing.

*...What is the purpose? To simply not speak to anyone? Not interact. Or is it to avoid people?*

George walks by in a towel, hair dripping. Bending down, he grabs my room key lying next to me and starts walking away. I laugh to myself. I jump up, letting my journal slide to the floor, and run after him. I grab his shoulder and try to snatch the key from his hand. His arms pull away.

“Woa. Use your words. What would you like?”

*You bastard. You feel power over me. I’m weak...*

I shake my head and try to snatch the key again. He pulls back.

He laughs mockingly. “You’re like Jesus in the desert and I’m the devil. Here you go.” He flicks the key to the floor and disappears into his room.

I pick up the key and head back to my journal, dejected.

*...Ok so what is an improvement from today? Open up your ears! Don’t speak. Listen. Silence is Golden.*

## **Day 2: Clowns & Calculus**

Wednesday passes quickly as I await a 6pm calculus exam. Finally, we are herded into the auditorium. Two girls at the front of the pack try to cram in that last equation. “Quick, explain the race-track principle one more time,” “When do you use the Second Fundamental Theorem?” I yawn.

I find a seat in the back by the wall. My chair squeaks loudly as it swivels to create distance from the wooden table. The room is noisy, a blend of laughter and panic. I close my eyes and meditate for a minute.

“We will be handing out the exams now,” a GSI announces from the front.

The room falls silent. Not a whisper. I try to sit still, hoping my chair’s squeak won’t disturb the beautiful silence. They have all lost their right to speak. We are all equal now, each of us restricted to our own minds. We are powerless—or is it powerful? I listen to the sound of paper slide on wood.

That night, as I try to pull Howard Roark from the pages of *The Fountainhead*, I get a knock on my door; three closed fist knocks: David. “I know you can’t talk. Lets smoke.”

With a J snug behind his ear, we make the long walk to the Arb. These walks are usually filled with passionate philosophical dialogue. We exchange ideas and opinions with little effort. We interrupt each other whenever there’s the urge; as the idea enters the conscience, it exits the mouth, no delay. We have come to understand this as the best way, or comfortable way to converse.

But as we walk to the Arb this time, a new monologue emerges. David confides what I deem a deep secret; “she is the first and only girl I have ever loved.” At times, I desperately want to interject; “*how do you know what love is?*” The words almost spill. I grunt instead.

We settle silently into our normal bench, overlooking an open field. A blue light flashes at a relaxing pace under the distant skyline. A dog’s howl echoes around us, as if we are in a cave. We feel powerful.

David lights the J and begins a new story about a poor boy named Timmy and a mean clown named Bobo. Now, I listen without an urge to reply. I listen because I enjoy David the storyteller. At the end, I want to tell him how talented he is, how impressed I am. I want to discuss the story, hear what he thinks the moral is.

But we walk home in silence. My own head is abuzz. I listen, feeling each thought pass through my conscience like sticky glue slowly sliding across my brain. This is flow. I am listening.

As the dorm comes into view, David breaks the silence. “I just want you to know that I wouldn’t have told you any of that if you could talk.”

### **Day 3: Slips and Sadness**

My emblazoned palm is more than my spokesperson, it is my lifeline. As I head into psych lecture, a fresh phrase stains skin: ‘I CAN LISTEN.’ I find my regular lefty-desk in the 500-seat auditorium and pull up the lecture slides on my laptop:

‘Development: Part 2.’ David squeezes through the aisle and sinks into the seat next to me. The lights dim, a film flickers on before us: *Through a Child’s Eyes: 9/11, an HBO Special*. The buzz in the auditorium drops to a hush. We are ready to listen.

Child after child tries to make sense of 9/11: “Why can’t God stop the bad people?” six-year old Wajiha wonders; “I’m going to be a fireman when I grow older. Like my dad was,” says little Shayne, decked out in a plastic firefighter costume. I sink into my seat. “It’s like a mountain of sadness that gets smaller and smaller until it’s just a little bump,” says Katie who also lost her father. I sink deeper into my seat and close my eyes; I don’t want to listen anymore. “I feel something good is coming. It just hasn’t happened yet,” a high, nasally voice says.

*Wait. I know that voice.*

I open my eyes to see a young Yedidya Schwartz, a kid I know as ‘Didi.’

“What. I know that kid. That’s Didi!” I blurt out.

David turns to me, astonished.

My upper lip eats my lower lip. *I just spoke...Oops.*

### **Day 4: God Speak**

Thursday afternoons at 3:15, I debate God and religion with an orthodox rabbi on Hill Street. We have been at each other’s throats for over two months now. Today won’t be much of a debate.

As I lock my bike to the misplaced ‘YIELD’ sign in the front yard, I notice the ‘Jewish Resource Center’ banner hanging from the second floor balcony; without the sign, the neglected house would be mistaken for an abandoned shack.

Up three soggy steps, my shoes chip turquoise paint to reveal more naked wood. Inside, the house feels unstable, the floor almost hollow. I follow the narrow staircase to the second floor. At the top, my back slides down the wall until my butt finds floor, legs stretch out, and my torn Vans add prints to peeling wallpaper. I grab at my ears; headphones fall to my chest, dangling out from the top of my green windbreaker—my mom’s from the 80’s. I am early, as usual.

I listen to two young voices—one younger than the other—from an open door down the hall:

“...states children are not to suffer for their parent’s sins. But Deuteronomy claims explicitly that children *shall* suffer for their parent’s sins. Explain to me how that contradiction makes sense.”

“I can point to hundreds of contradictions in the texts. Much better than the one you provide. I could go through each piece of text separately and explain the logic and context surrounding. But I believe you have a better question than that one, a bigger a question. But, our time is up. Think about it for next week.”

A chair pushes back; a jacket zips; a bag thuds against a back. “Thank you rabbi.”

I get up and hug the wall. A tall lengthy kid with a knitted Keepah on his head and Samba’s on his feet appears from around the corner. He sidesteps through the narrow passage, disappearing down the stairs with his head down. It has been four weeks and I have yet to see his eyes.

I enter. Rabbi Bausk sits behind a desk strewn with rabbinic texts; a naked mattress lies awkwardly on a metal bedframe to his right. His head is covered with his usual plain black Keepah. I smile and take a seat. I feel weak.

Bausk says: “I got your email. I’m more than happy doing all the talking. You realize I have you just where I want you. I could frustrate the bejeebers out of you. I’m so excited; I don’t even know where to start. But I’ll be nice to you.”

*He would rather listen to himself. Reinforce what he already believes as fact. That is our difference. I am here to listen, to question my own beliefs. He is here not to listen, but to reply and refute.*

The next 45 minutes fly by. I listen as he explains the reasons behind the oral vs. written texts. “The written Torah is like the textbook. The oral Torah is like the lecture. The lecture keeps the interpretation of the textbook uniform. God wrote the book *and* gives the lecture...” Thoughts, questions, and arguments whizz down my pencil, filling my yellow legal pad: ‘*Power of speech,*’ ‘*Why do we desire uniformity?*’ ‘*This seems all too convenient.*’ These points will make for a rich debate next week.

I leave the aesthetically neglected community house feeling intellectually nurtured. It was a new feeling compared to previous weeks. My passion and fear of being wrong usually deafens me. I become unable to listen, to see any sense in his beliefs. But today, I had been defenseless, unable to side with the comforting agnostic opposition. I listened deeper into the rabbi’s words. Without speaking, I was composed, cool, and collected. My ears stayed open. My desire to listen was greater than my desire to reply.

That night, I settle into my hallway alcove to journal.

*Speech is an overused tool. Abused freely, it's my biggest weakness. Others can interpret my thoughts and tone and discover my vulnerabilities with ease. Used thoughtfully and sparingly, my words are powerful, impressive, and desired. So listen first. Respond second. Remember, there are times to speak, and more times to listen.*

### **Day 5, Part 1: Alone With Friends**

It's Saturday night and I'm drinking beers with closed lips in David's room. Kendrick Lamar drowns out two conversations around me. Oregon vs. Oregon State is muted on the TV. My new friends surround me. I feel alone, frustrated, and tipsy.

"You alright?" David says.

Andrea and Sarah give me worried looks.

"He's alone in his world of the verb less" George fails with his eloquence.

I worry to myself:

*Do I look that bad? Cheer up! Or at least don't show your loneliness. That's weakness.*

I squint and nod assuredly at David. He looks unconvinced.

The Natty Lite cans that line the table lead the conversation to the economics of recycling. George's *Clockwork Orange* t-shirt ignites a debate over whether the book or movie is better. Sarah recalls the time a stranger convinced her to snort Adderall at a pregame. I listen, entertained.

"I miss his voice." Sarah makes a puppy face at me.

"That's crazy. I can't remember what it sounds like," David says.

"Me neither," George says. "What do you say we all put in ten dollars and make him not speak for another month?"

"No way, I miss Howard," Sarah says.

*I'm right here. Aren't I...?*

George pulls a Guinness from the mini fridge. I point at the beer and back at myself, twice. Without hesitation, he pulls another bottle and tosses it underhand. The wet glass connects with my hand like a baseball to a glove. Condensation spreads over my palm, sharpie bleeds from 'LISTEN.' My leg taps anxiously. How long has it been doing that? I grab a flip-flop from between my feet, pushing heel to bottle-cap confidently. I watch the cap launch like a rock from a catapult, disappearing over the TV. Should I get that? I stay seated.

My leg is still tapping. I continue a tantalizing thought:

*Face your fear. Get with a girl at a party without saying a word. But whom would you be doing that for? For her? Definitely not. For your friends? I hope not. For you? Yes. Without your words, all you are is a cute face with some peach fuzz.*

I jump up grabbing my coat from under me. My arms find holes, my fingers find metal and my eyes find George's. I point at the door.

### **Day 5, Part 2: Brothers & Bros**

"And who do you know here?" The red polo turns to George.

George hesitates. "uhh, Brandon."

“Brandon who?”

George shrugs. “He’s in our English class.”

“Alright boys. I’m not trying to be a dick but you’re gonna have to step off the porch and get outta here.”

I’m not listening. I reach my right hand into slim khakis; my thumb and index maneuver around my wallet for my black sharpie—a fat one, a few hours old. My hand scribbles on my stained palm. I feel four eyes staring. I stretch my hand to his face. ‘UR NOT TRYING 2 BE A DICK?’

My body’s light; the balls of my feet press into the ground, ready to jump. I watch his hand, waiting for his fingers to curl into a fist. What am I thinking? The kid has at least 30 pounds on me.

“What are you doing?” He shakes his head, confused. “Just get outta here.”

“We just want to party with you guys,” George says pathetically.

An arm hooks around my shoulder, another around George’s—Brandon, our hero.

“Yo B-dog, you know these kids?”

“Yeah, they’re cool.” Brandon grins widely, reveling in his new power and popularity.

“Ok B-dog, as long as you say so.”

The brother-pledge class relationship confuses me: ‘I can disrespect you when no one is around but at parties, we are tight.’

The polo steps aside and I pass quickly through. The front door is modern with a heavy-duty metal frame, maybe a response to the numerous home invasions plaguing campus lately. A rosy-cheeked brunette tumbles onto the porch, pigtails whipping my face as she jerks her head. I grab the door, and step up onto hardwood. I made it.

A narrow hallway packed with bodies and plastic cups. My ears throb in rhythm to DMX.

*The dance floor is a good place to start, no words necessary, only hips.*

I take a step but a hand suddenly pulls the back of my coat. I’m back on the porch.

A lengthy toothpick stands two inches taller than me, fake bling hanging stupidly on top of an oversized NBA jersey, plastic sunglasses hiding his insecurities. “Who are you? This is a themed party.”

I shrug uselessly and point back at the red polo.

“He let us in.” George is by my side again.

“I don’t give a shit. You boys aren’t dressed to theme. Get out of here.”

It seems we have reached the next chain of command.

“Why does that matter?”

“Cause I say it matters. Did you hear me? Leave.”

We aren’t listening.

The door swings open again. A new pair of venomous eyes lock with mine. I feel his anger. The ringleader has arrived.

“What’s the problem here? Who the fuck is this kid? Get the fuck out of here.”

Everything falls away. His fury is unexplainable. He has no idea what has already happened. I have no idea what is about to happen.

George is explaining his case to the red polo. I take my sharpie and scribble on the back of my hand, above my thumb: “Y U SO MAD?”

His eyes jump from my hand to my face. “What the fuck are you doing?” His eyes beam at mine. Such anger. I stare back, unfazed. *Really, why are you so mad?* I’m back on the balls of my feet.

I watch him maneuver around the porch, sliding between unassuming leg warmers and polos. I watch his eyes lock on George, face contract, fist clench and without hesitation, arm swing. No remorse.

I need to yell, warn George who is blind to the impending fist headed for his face. I need to do something. I open my mouth to scream but no sound comes out. I am frozen.

Knuckles connect with George’s left cheek; the sound is foreign, unlike the punches you hear in movie fight scenes, He drops to the ground, head slamming into concrete. I blink, stretching my eye sockets as wide as possible.

*You drunk fuck. You couldn’t even punch the right guy.*

I jump towards him ready to draw blood. The red polo restrains my lean arms; hands lock around my biceps like handcuffs. I’m pathetic.

George props himself back on his feet, stunned.

“What the fucks his problem.” George dabs his swelling lip gently.

I try to take a deep breath. We are outnumbered, outsized, and on their turf. I pull George by the arm and lead him down the stairs.

Back on the sidewalk, I slap my hand to my forehead, letting it slide down to my mouth. I jump in frustration. I clench my fists, pound my chest, and bite my lower lip. I want to scream.

I look at George and pound my chest three times with an open hand.

“The punch was for you?”

I nod.

“Did you provoke him?”

I put my thumb and index out, separating them by a small space.

“A little. Did I deserve it?”

I shake my head.

Guilt is overwhelming. My emotions are begging to be released.

*I froze. I could have warned him...I choked.*

I stare at the frat house in front of me. Fingers claim my belt buckle, unbutton my khakis, and pull my dick out. I piss on their lawn pathetically.

“That seems fitting. Did I deserve it?”

I shake my head again. We head back towards the dorm.

“Where were we earlier?”

I look at George worriedly.

“You haven’t been speaking. I feel weird. I think I’m concussed.”

*Oh shit. I caused this. It’s my fault.*

“Did I deserve it? Do I keep saying that?”

I nod. I don’t know what to do.

“What happened? Who were we with earlier...*did I deserve it?*”

I shake my head. I’ve heard enough. My ears turn inward.

*OK easy decision. Hospital. Anything could be wrong. Don’t think the worst yet. Stay in the present. Keep listening. Initiative.*

I strike my arm in a north, then west direction—towards the hospital. My pace quickens; George follows.

He looks clueless. “I got punched. I’ve never been punched before. This is interesting.”

I try my sharpie. My hand is completely stained. I pull up my sleeve and scrawl ‘THINK ABOUT ANYTHING.’ George stops and grabs my arm. He leans in, straining his eyes. His nose exhales on my skin.

“It’s too dark. Why are you writing on yourself?”

*Shit. He needs help now. This can’t wait. He’s lost in his own mind. What’s your stupid vow of silence compared to a friend in need.*

“George, what’s the last thing we did in English class?”

“the...*Mother Night* trial?”

“Yeah. Tell me something about the trial”

“It ended, what two days ago? You were...I think you were Werner Noth. “

I quicken pace again; George adjusts.

“Is that right?”

“Not exactly.” The trial ended a week and a half ago. I played Howard Campbell.

“Did I deserve it? Who punched me? You weren’t talking before.”

“George I need you to forget what happened. Forget tonight. Tell me about your brother.”

I pretended to listen, my own thoughts directing my attention inward.

*I just broke the vow. I failed. Yogis go their whole lives. I couldn’t even last a week. No, don’t think about it like that. Speaking was necessary. Listening was finally not enough. It took five days, but I finally needed my voice.*

## **Day 6: Beneath the Silence**

I woke up the next morning unsure George would know what year it is. I found him in the bathroom staring at the mirror.

“Hey check this out,” thumbs curling over his upper lip, uncovering a blend of blues, purples and reds.

“Haha. Nice man. Do you know what day it is?”

“Yeah...Sunday. I couldn’t remember that?”

“Naw, you narrowed it down to the weekend but couldn’t decide on the day.”

“Wow, what else happened?”

I told him the details. He had no recollection of talking with the police, The CAT scan, or even his obese doctor that I mistook for a grizzly bear. I watched his eyes expand as I explained how he kept reading his texts over and over again like a broken record, eerily repeating, “It’s like I’m coming into someone else’s life.”

“Damn. That’s scary. You must have been freaking out.”

“Yeah, I was pretty worried. You feel fine now?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Did I deserve it?”

*Oh god.*

George bursts out laughing. “You should have just seen your face.”

Relief floods my body, like the deep breath after the doctor tells you that lump in your neck is just a swollen lymph node. My fist connects playfully with his arm.

Word spread quickly around the dorm; I guess George was curling his lip like a trophy. But everyone wanted to hear a good story and George couldn't provide much detail.

At dinner, David finds me over a heaping plate of potatoes.

"I want to hear what happened from *you*."

I tell a tale about two poor boys and a mean red polo. David listens. I am the storyteller right now.

That evening, I head to yoga for a candle-lit class. As I climb the steps to the second floor studio, the peaceful humidity fogs my glasses. I look up to a blurred smile behind the haze—Jason, my instructor welcoming me in. Shoes and socks off, my feet exhale onto the smooth hardwood floor. The muted orange hue emanating from candles lining the room blends with the baby blue walls—a sunset.

I unroll my mat and find a comforting lotus position alongside my peers. My eyes flutter closed.

I follow Jason's voice as it travels from behind me and settles at the front of the room; he begins with same mantra as usual: "Watch your breath. If your mind drifts away, bring it back slowly. To still the mind is yoga. *Listen*." I have heard these same sentences for the past three months; today is the first time I listen.

A silence settles over the room.

In through the nose...My lungs expand and fill with life; I watch this life travel down my spine to my toes. Out through the nose...My chest slowly falls; the life is guided out of my nostrils.

*Pure silence is nonexistent. There will always be my breath.*

Thought leaves my mind blank. I listen to my breath, the breath around me. The sound of tires on pavement rushes by below. I listen. The muted laughter and clink of glasses seeps through the ceiling from the pub below. I listen. The energy within the room engulfs me and flows through me. I listen.

*Breathe in...Breathe out...in...out...in...*