

## The Silent

Carlisle parked his car in 1B as directed by the parking attendant at the gate. He looked up to the five-story hotel that came highly recommended by a quick internet search as being the best place from Tennessee to Canada to disconnect from the world. Following the daffodil-lined path to the lobby, excitement mingled with nerves as he opened the door and was greeted by a black-haired receptionist in slacks and a blue blazer behind the counter. Instantly taking a liking to her, Carlisle felt abruptly at ease, as if forced into a state of euphoria.

“Welcome to The Silent, Mr. Graphs. You will be in room 6S. We do have a few rules.” Carlisle felt himself nodding to the woman as his suitcase was ripped from his hands by a man with kind but overly stern eyes, who looked as if he might be living in a war with no relief. “We ask that all residents check technology at the front desk, aside from one item of your choosing, just our little way of ensuring that all residents get the quiet necessary to be truly at peace.”

Carlisle watched himself hand over everything he owned with wires, except his iPod, briefly and vaguely wondering what would possess him to do so. Never before had he felt so compelled to do as he was told, most especially by a stranger, yet here he was doing exactly that.

“Great, you’re almost set. You are welcome to leave whenever you like, however, we do prefer you don’t, in order to avoid the distractions of the outside world. You come here for peace, and we do our best to grant that.” Carlisle nodded, knowing he had nowhere to go anyway, “Just need you to sign this waiver stating you will uphold our atmosphere of silence by not speaking to staff or other residents.” He watched, again, as his hand signed the waiver of its own accord as directed by the lady. “Once you pass through these walls, you will begin your new life. In your room, there is a box which will allow you to contact the front desk should you need something. We serve three meals a day. When you are hungry, you need only to push the green

button on the box and we will bring your meal. There is a reception hall on every floor open to residents from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. Residents are welcome to read or play games with each other; however, reception rooms still hold to the rules of silence. Marshall will take you to your room now.”

Carlisle tried to ask for a key, but never got the words out. The lady answered his question without having heard it, “You won’t need a key, all resident doors are kept unlocked 24/7.” Marshall led him through a whitewashed door and down a hallway. Observing the subdued tans on the walls and floors, he noticed that if you didn’t look close enough, you might think that the walls and floor were one and the same. Carlisle thought to ask questions, but as soon as he thought them, Marshall would glare at him over his shoulder.

When they finally reached his room, Carlisle stepped inside expecting some kind of grandeur. After all, with the price they charged per month it should look like the Ritz. What awaited him, however, was more tan, with nothing more than a dresser, a small portable closet, a bed with the sheets and blankets he had been instructed to bring already thrown perfectly across them, and a private bathroom. With Marshall gone and his door closed, Carlisle began rummaging through his things searching for his notebook, his most prized possession with sketches, writing and memories of life before Abby left him. He could not find the well-loved notebook anywhere. He couldn’t have possibly left it at home, he would never forget the last thing Abby gave him. Perhaps it was in his car, he would go look for it tomorrow. A small knock at the door startled him. When he opened it, the hallway was empty in either direction, though he had the distinct feeling he was being watched from a distance. Shaking the eeriness of the absolute quiet, he looked down to find a journal laying on the floor. Though not his own, he picked it up and flipped through it, shutting the door as he did. Seeing nothing else to do, he

turned his iPod on, quietly, and sat down on the bed to write. He would continue the search for his own at a later time.

June 7th

It's been four days since I left Abby in the cemetery. Strained as our relationship may have been, she was everything to me. I already miss her so much. I just can't imagine my life without her.

*Carlisle could see the black swirls around him, could see the white box holding his life. He could feel the tension. The anger. The hatred. He could hear the "poor dear", "so sad", "bless their hearts" coming from visitors. But most importantly, he could hear Abby's desperate sobs as they buried the tiny infant who never even took a first breath. A baby girl dead, doing what her conception was intended for, saving a marriage. Carlisle never wanted the child, until she was gone. Now he already missed her. Now he wanted her more than anything else in this world. He was finally her dad, and he wanted nothing more than to find a way to give her a sibling and Abby the child she so desperately wanted.*

Suddenly, the lights all shut off and a hushing noise came seemingly from the air. It wasn't long before Carlisle had fallen asleep, journal forgotten and thrown on the floor.

The following day, Carlisle woke late and hungry, having not eaten since the morning before. He pushed the green button on the box hanging directly above his tiny dresser. He opened his door and waited anxiously for the food to be delivered. It was only a few moments before Marshall, looking slightly more tired than the day before, set the tray on Carlisle's desk. Carlisle wanted to ask him if he was feeling well, but was silenced by another glare. Though given the most luxurious meal of mashed potatoes and chicken fried steak with gravy, the taste was lost to him. Truth be told, he wasn't even sure if he was hungry or if his body just told him he was out of habit.

After finishing most of the tasteless meal, Carlisle wandered down to the empty reception area. There he found three tables and a couple of leather couches. The tables each had a game or puzzle laying on top. He found a puzzle of three cats playing with balloons. *That's just silly, their claws would pop the balloons.* Marshall came into the room, swept up the puzzle and presented a new one with a multi-faceted world in black and white. *Now this is better. Abby would love this scene.* Carlisle had never felt so relaxed in all his thirty-six years. He finished the puzzle and Marshall brought him another, this one filled with hot air balloons floating like bobbers in water, which he finished within hours. The last one he was given was one of his own beloved Abby, staring up at him from the broken pieces. He put the pieces together as though he'd done so a thousand times before. Each and every detail of her face flashing in front of him in a strange permanence, dancing in and out of the tiny puddles forming on most of the pieces. Her solemn expression standing alone, watching, bestowing the guilt he knew deserved.

*Carlisle looked down on his ever-gorgeous wife. Her hair laid in a tangled, ratted mess around her, but she was beautiful none the less. Thank God she couldn't see herself now. She'd never forgive him for looking at her like this. She was pale, no rosiness to her normally excitable face. Her lips shrunken, shriveled from dehydration. Her eyes puffy from exertion. And her stomach flat. The realization that they had lost a second child sinking in with terrifying force. The four-months she had spent in agony with their rainbow baby now wasted and gone, as if they never existed.*

He stayed there, doing nothing in particular, until Marshall glared at him indicating it was time to leave. His completed puzzles now adorned the walls of his room, the one of Abby somehow more haunting than it had been as he put it together, the pieces bubbled where tears had splashed. The lights flicked off and the whooshing came back into the air.

The next two months passed in ritual. Each morning he kissed Abby and mumbled almost indiscernibly that he loved her and was counting down the days until he could see her again. Then he would eat and journal, get glared at by Marshall repeatedly, go to the reception hall where he would eat his lunch and dinner, and then go to bed.

My darling Abby,

I miss you so much. I almost wish this month would end already, as relaxing as this has been, just so I can see you again. I miss your singing as you cook some crazy concoction that winds up tasting amazing. I want to try to start our family when I get back. I know you have felt just so terrible since we lost little nugget, and I have too, sweetie. But I really feel like this time it could be different, I think we might be able to go full-term this time. We can make it; I know we can. We have to.

His meals started dwindling with each one, but most had been filling despite looking like nothing more than haggis (a disgusting delicacy he had once been coerced into trying while on a fraternity trip).

That three months had passed did not occur to him as he wrote in his journal before breakfast on a particularly difficult morning, which had started with the image of two graves, unmarked, dancing on his nerves, seemingly in every corner of his room.

Every day here is starting to feel like a vacation in a haunted memory from which there is no escape. I still think of Abby every day, but except the picture of her, she is slipping away from me. I wish I could say I was strong enough, but I'm just so angry all the time, and mostly at her. She left me to this place all alone.

He ordered breakfast from an increasingly ragged-looking Marshall, who seemed to be working at all times of the day. This would be the last day he would visit the reception center. He sat down to a puzzle at the farthest end of the room, the two unmarked graves from his dream taunting his world, an obsession he could not place or escape. He finished all but two pieces, which seemed to be missing. He left the room frustrated and defeated. The graves taking their place on the wall beside Abby, daring him to hate them both. He spent the day watching them,

willing them to disappear, to leave his beloved alone and stop following him. His instinct told him, though, that he was being devoured by them, and there was nothing he could do about it.

The beginning of the fourth month at The Silent seemed akin to an attack on the senses, quietly invading his mind, body and soul. He grew angrier by the day when given more and more unworthy meals. The final bend to break him came as he clicked the play button more times than necessary on his iPod and even tried changing songs, but they all screamed at him in silence. It was as if his iPod had suddenly become incapable of doing anything at all. He plugged it in, and nothing happened. He knew he had charged it the night before. Hadn't he? It was his only joy in the day, surely he hadn't forgotten. After attempting the buttons several more times, he picked up the device and let it fly across the room. It wasn't until he heard the glass breaking that he thought of his wife. He looked to the puzzle, and through blurred eyes, stared at the pieces cutting into his beloved's face. Marshall slowly, sadly opened the door, and Carlisle knew he was collecting the now shattered, useless player. Stripping the final connection to the outside world. Taking the only reminder of life beyond The Silent. There was nothing to be done, so he shrugged and went back to his breakfast, resigned to his fate. Too lost to care. Alive just enough to beg for mercy.

God, if you exist, let me leave this place. I miss my Abby. Just let me have her back. Let her come back to me. Let her come find me and take me from this hell hole. I swear, I will take our children to church every single week, and even through the weekdays. Please, I'm begging you. Take me from here and give me back my love, and I will do everything possible to serve you.

By the middle of the fifth month, his hair no longer bounced. His journal forgotten with the desperate, unanswered cries of its last entry. He worked to eat only the least molded pieces of food he was served, but in the end gave it up. His clothes clinging to him with the last effort their shredded threads could manage on his diminishing form. He once tried to push his food back to

Marshall, trying to ask for something else without getting in trouble. Marshall shook his sickly head and set it on Marshall's desk, gazing longingly at it.

It was the morning of another unremarkable, uncounted day that Marshall brought him a letter. It read: *Dear Mr. Graphs, as you know, you have signed on for an indefinite stay. Carlisle didn't remember signing anything at all, but it didn't matter in the end. He was doomed to live the life they planned for him. It has been brought to our notice that you are no longer thriving, and we feel it would be in your best interest to be working alongside Marshall. You will be expected to wake up with him and do as he indicates until you are back to a normal health. You will also be bunking with him in the recovery wards. Yours Truly, Silent Staff.*

Carlisle found that while he read, Marshall had already packed up his things. They sloshed to the basement, only to find that it was a dark, dingy grey, like a picture of a hundred-year-old hospital. There was dirt on the walls and floors. The churning in his stomach spurred on by the smell of mildew, wet animal and a floral shop, as if flowers could ever cover the grime. Every corner seemed to be beckoning to him with eyes unseen. Sleeping bodies lay in their beds through open doors, barely visible beneath their grungy, sagging blankets. The smells and sights proved too much for his stomach, and he retched what little there was against an unsuspecting Marshall, earning him another of Marshall's infamous glares. They reached Marshall's quarters, which were significantly smaller than Carlisle's previous arrangement and had twice the amount of furniture. A dresser, bed and portable closet for each of them. Down the hallway, a scream suddenly broke the silence. Carlisle jumped at the abrupt noise, having almost forgotten what noise sounded like.

"It ain't fair! I won't do it no more!" A faded black-haired woman in slacks and a blue blouse burst towards them. "It ain't fair, I tell you!" She paused long enough to stare

intentionally into Carlisle's eyes, almost as if she recognized him. "Run, Mr. Graphs. Run." Two guards came around the corner armed with rifles and tasers and fought her back to her quarters, her screeches of "RUN" echoed down the hallway. Carlisle had never seen guards before that moment, and yet, somehow it seemed fitting. He felt as if he'd known they were there all along. Carlisle's pondering of the existence of guards was interrupted by a rumbling rolling down the hallway, Marshall pulled Carlisle in the room in time for them both to watch a stampede of broken, hollow bodies gathering enough strength to force their way to a door which had gone unnoticed by Carlisle. The guards were no match for the mass confusion that followed. Several guards even joined in the chaos as they disappeared out the small door at the end of the hallway. Carlisle turned to Marshall to ask what was happening, but he knew there would be no response, and so turned back to watch the ever-growing stampede, disappearing without a trace to the whisper of a life they were desperate to find.

Within weeks, Carlisle had withered away to almost nothing, and Marshall had been moved from their shared quarters to the corridor where the suit and blouse lady had incited a riot all that time ago. Carlisle served masters who would one day be in the same position, this knowledge encouraged him to serve them as well, if not better than, Marshall had him until that fateful day, even though his own body was fighting him. He could not pinpoint why he was still here; he would occasionally think that he should have left by now. He would think of those poor, sad bodies who had escaped the depressive hell he found himself dwelling in. He would long to leave through the door to find a life outside of The Silent, if such a thing existed. But he couldn't drag his worn-out body more than five steps towards the door. Always drawn back to his fate of servitude for The Silent. He had watched as several staff members tried to talk or leave and were vanished. Carlisle knew that he did not want to be 'disappeared,' whatever that entailed.



One day a guard came to Carlisle with the letter. *Dear Carlisle, As you know, Marshall was no longer capable of carrying out his responsibilities. He was moved to the upcare units and has since passed. Please take this second letter to Mr. Jones, as he will now be your assistant. Yours Truly, Silent Staff.*

Carlisle went to room 5B and held out the letter for Mr. Jones who read while Carlisle packed up his things, glancing around at the puzzles. The nagging of a memory of former joy screamed to be remembered. Just as quickly as the strange thought came, it was gone. They followed the grungy hallway to Carlisle's quarters. Mr. Jones handled the grunge and smell far better than Carlisle had back before the servant life.

When not called by his masters, Carlisle would stare at the puzzle of the beautiful girl on the wall and wonder how in the world the glass was broken, and why the two graves hanging in their own frame beside her seemed to be her most striking accessory.

The day came that Carlisle and his puzzles were moved to the dreaded upcare unit, where he was starved and ignored. On the Monday of the seventh week in the unit, Carlisle passed, happy in the knowledge that he had served The Silent and his masters well. The girl in the picture smiled, which he could not remember having seen. The ghost of an infant suddenly on her shoulder, turning its face from the onlookers. She seemed to beckon to him, welcoming him to join her. Begging him to leave the masters he had acquired since her passing.