

The Silence of Harold

by Pamela J. Parker

It's been sixteen days since I spoke with another soul. I don't mind much, but I know enough about people to know most would think I'm mighty odd.

Muriel, for example. She'd be pissed as all get out. "Harold," she'd say, in her gravelly voice. Muriel always sounded like she'd been a smoker for eighty years, but she wasn't. "What's wrong with you?" and when I still didn't say anything, she'd say, "Get out of this apartment and go talk to someone. Be civil for Christ's sakes."

Who, Muriel? Just who exactly should I talk to?

And why? Why is it so important? If I've got nothing to say, then what's so dumb about keeping my mouth shut?

But, I guess when it comes right down to it, I sure as hell miss Muriel. I miss her raspy voice and her curly hair that smelled like the hairdresser's every three weeks, even when it got that stupid purple tinge in the gray. And, the way she folded that crocheted afghan and laid it just so on the back of the couch. She wouldn't be happy with how I leave the afghan.

For forty-four years we lived over our corner drug store in Haydenville. We talked. Maybe not as much as some couples, but Muriel was no fool. That's why I married her. That and her ass, but that's not really the point. Some people talk out of their asses. Ha. Not my Muriel though. She knew how I hated small talk. Save words for when you need them, that's what I always said. Muriel sighed then, if she made any noise.

When her knees and hips got bad, then worse, we sold the store, to Carl Hendrickson, the last in a long run of pharmacists, packed

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up the stuff that we didn't give away to Good Will and moved here.

It's a decent place. Even if it is in Northampton. We used to avoid 'Hamp, got so crowded and full of Smith College lesbos. But, turned out the apartment was a great location for us. Easy to walk to the grocery store, the hairdresser, Look Park if we felt like feeding the ducks. We liked it, me and Muriel.

Up the block, there's a Dunkin Donuts, so if I ever felt like talking again, I could go there and order something. A regular coffee, none of that fancy double mocha shit they pass as coffee nowadays. Steaming coffee and a jelly donut. Chunk of heaven right there, except you've got to talk for it. Doesn't seem worth it yet.

It's easy to not talk at the grocery store and get what you need. When the pimply check out girl smiles and says, "And, how are you today," I look at her and shrug. That generally shuts her right up.

"That'll be \$24.37."

Holy shit — a quart of milk, some Folger's and frozen Swanson dinners, toilet paper and a box of Freihoffer's cookies. What the hell makes that almost 25 bucks? But, I don't say anything. I'm a man on a mission. World would be better off with more missionaries who shut the hell up.

Give her the money.

Take the change.

"Have a nice day," Miss Zit-face adds when she sees her manager passing by.

A nod and I go. Transaction completed. Food purchased.

And not a word wasted.

It's become a game. A challenge for an old coot like me.

Course, I realized this morning, if nobody knows but me, then who really gives a rat's ass?

So, for my own pleasure, or score-keeping, or whatever — it's something to do, right? — thought I'd write about keeping my mouth shut in a world that talks too damn much.

It's not that I don't hear people. I have a radio and a TV. I'm not that screwed up. Plus I have a deaf neighbor across the hall. Yesterday I had no choice but to listen to Oprah blaring from Mrs. Johnson's apartment. Christ, I could talk to her and she'd never even know it. Deaf as the cracks in the sidewalk. I suppose if one day I don't hear the TV from her place, I'll have to call someone and speak, because she'll either be dead or dying. Nothing to be proud of in keeping your mouth shut if opening it might save someone. Even a deaf old biddie.

Muriel's been dead over three years now. It was so screwed up. I was sitting on the can, trying to work it out with a pencil, if you know what I mean, when I heard this loud thump. I thought Muriel had slammed the door on her way out.

I was wrong. Sort of.

That thump I heard was Muriel on her way out. Literally.

I almost tripped over her when I came out of the crapper. Dead on that fading gold carpet in the hallway that she hated so much.

At least she went quick-like and that was good for her, but not so

great for me. Probably should have told her a few things.

Not much of a funeral. We never had kids. Suppose that was for the best. Not sure I could've stood all that baby talk — dumb ass “goo goo, gah gah” shit. Next thing you know, they're teenage smartmouths, saw enough of them in the store. Underwear showing with jeans practically down to their knees, for Christ's sake. And then, before you know it, they're grown up and think they can tell you how to run your life. My brother Fred's daughter was like that. She was always telling him what to do. If I had a kid, they'd be trying to get me talking now.

Yup, we were better off without kids.

Muriel might've been happier with them though. It seems a lot of women want the mothering thing. We didn't talk about it much after it never happened. She didn't seem too miserable, for the most part. And that's something right there.

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This morning I woke up hearing the back-up noises of the garbage truck out in the parking lot by the dumpster. Meant I slept later than usual. Generally I wake up when that crank across the hall slams her door on her way out. Not sure where she goes so early, but 6:30 a.m., that door wakes me right up most days.

Not today though.

Had a dream. I was back in the store, but it was all mixed up, like the dream stirred up stores in my mind and came up with a new one. It wasn't really our drug store. Looked more like the country store over in Southampton back when I was a kid. Muriel was chatting with some old lady who cackled like a hen with an egg stuck on the way out. I was stocking the canned vegetables,

wondering why there'd been such a run on creamed corn lately. I should've woken up right then. We didn't have canned vegetables in our corner drug store. I should've known I was dreaming and made myself wake up. But, the dream kept rolling.

The bell over the door rang as cackle lady left.

Muriel came over and sat on the unopened boxes of canned peas.

“That lady said they're fixing to build a Walgreens over in Easthampton.”

In my dream, I felt my blood pressure pick up. Walgreens? That spelled the end for any small town pharmacy.

I worked the kink out of my back and stood up.

“Guess that'll be the end of us,” she said, standing and taking the broom that was leaning up against the cereal boxes. She started walking away, hunched over swaying down past her jiggly old lady waist. As she walked, she became younger with every step she took. That didn't strike me as strange at all.

“Well, nothing lasts forever, Muriel,” I said to her back.

Then that dang garbage truck beeped her right out of my head. And I would have liked to talk to her more. My words weren't wasted with Muriel.

So, I dragged my bones out of bed, took a leak. Washing my hands, I tried not to look at my baggy face with grey stubble in the mirror. It's a hell of a thing to see an ancient geezer looking back and you're not sure where on earth he came from. I was starting to wonder if I should check on Mrs. Johnson, but the TV fired up across

the hall.

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Sixteen days ago I hung up the phone. Last words I've spoken to another soul, not to another face, mind you, can't say for sure when that was. Still, I think a phone conversation counts as human interaction, sort of.

Until about a month ago, I talked with my brother, Fred, out in California every other Sunday or so. Fred had the cancer of the gut. He knew he was checking out. In his way, Fred let me know he had about had it.

"Well Harold, I'm tired and I'm ready."

"You sure, Fred?"

"Yup."

"Well, all right then. Hope it goes easy for you."

"You talk to Corrine once in a while, ok?" Fred asked.

"Sure." It doesn't matter if you lie to someone who's dying, right?

"Hey, I've got to go. Corrine's here," Fred said. "Bye Harold."

"Bye, Fred."

And I was pretty sure I wouldn't be talking to Fred again. I felt like shit about that. Hung up the phone and sat and let myself have a cry. He was a damn good brother.

Corrine called sixteen days ago. She's Fred's oldest daughter. I haven't seen her in twenty years, not since Muriel and I went out for her wedding. She couldn't come out for Muriel's funeral — I forget, one of her kids was sick or something. Fred came.

“Uncle Harold, Dad died last night. We're working on the funeral arrangements today. Do you think you could get here by Saturday if we had it then?”

“I don't think I'll be able to come out.”

“Oh... I'm sorry Uncle Harold. Is everything all right for you? I mean, um, do you need money for the plane ticket?”

“Jesus, no, it's not that. My back's out of whack again and I don't think I can make that long flight.”

After Muriel's service, I promised myself, no more funerals. Had to go to that one. I'd be a poor excuse for a man if I skipped my own wife's funeral. But I told myself, that was it. Funerals just weren't for everyone and I figured I'd paid my funeral dues. No more. Tapped out. Muriel's about killed me. I'd told Fred I wouldn't go to his. He didn't care.

“Ok, well, I'll call you next week. You take care of yourself, Uncle Harold,” Corrine said. I wondered if she was looking at palm trees out her window.

“Thanks, I will. Bye.” Out my kitchen window, I saw an old oak that had forgotten to drop half its leaves. Looked like a grizzled old man. Kind of like me.

And that's when it hit me, if Fred's gone, who else do I know worth talking to? Fixed myself some Folgers as I thought about it. Two minutes in the microwave gets a mug of water good and hot.

Stir in the coffee. Add a little milk. Good to go.

Went into the living room. Because of the habit Muriel had inflicted on me, I put a cardboard coaster from Leon's Tap under my coffee cup on the side table. Turned the heating pad on and creaked myself down into my old LaZBoy.

And, I considered the question some more.

I couldn't think of anyone I wanted to talk to, or, for that matter, I couldn't imagine a single person who wanted to talk to me.

So, I decided not to talk to anyone.

And, I guess that's about all she wrote.

