

## Golden Silence

Lou's plastic chair creaked as she changed positions yet again. Every time her trouser fabric resettled she had to move, stretching any surplus to once more obscure her thighs. The offending velour tracksuit had been purchased on her behalf at a nearby mall by one of the nurses. Because Lou, like an idiot, had packed for 'Africa'. She had not packed for southernmost South Africa in the late Autumn, which, it turned out, was a very different, very not warm thing; with a climate that forced her into these merciless synthetics. Being punished likewise did little to ease her discomfort. She fidgeted where she sat, the prickle of encircling eyes on her skin providing the only source of heat.

It was Lou's third week into a 90-day programme on the outskirts of Cape Town, wherein all now gathered for the weekly Community meeting; its express business being to exorcise any behaviour deemed 'detrimental' to the culture of the treatment centre – each and every Friday. And it was here that Lou's sentence was meted out. Without trial or jury, she noted. This was basement justice. Basements, always strip-lit, always damp, were likewise always the preferred site for therapy—in its many guises—at every facility she had, so far, passed through. The typically larger floorspace was practical, that could not be denied, but neither could the no-one-can-hear-you scream quality. Well, no one would hear her now, regardless. 'Golden Silence' was the name given to this ten-day period of enforced quiet. Lou's, that is – all other residents were free to make their usual racket.

Lou had initially protested the ruling, despite its proposed spiritual pedagogy:

"So, don't actually be *honest* in group therapy, or you'll be penalised. Right. Sounds healthy."

“Hey! Lou! Quit being a smart ass, man. You’ve caused enough trouble.” Nurse Thandi’s clipped Cape accent fired back from the far side of the circle. Beneath the overstuffed white uniform, two portly shins dangled, not quite touching the floor. At 4ft 11in, Thandi’s command was significantly larger than her size, although she regained much in sideways territory. Her word was final.

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Lou had flown from London to the nearest rehab specialising in eating disorders that her parents could afford. Anything in the UK would have had an additional zero tacked onto the cost; or two for the US. Primary-care was so underfunded and over-subscribed at home that you had to be on death’s door to get a spot, which meant getting far worse to get a chance at getting better. Some would call this inconvenient. But here at the bottom of the world sat a hinter-place for those who had long existed at life’s rock-bottom; those on an unenthused, oftentimes coerced mission to get their lives together. Eventually. It was also far away enough that Lou felt close to disappearing entirely, which was welcome.

Less welcome were the Life Stories: autobiographical accounts of each patient’s history that were read aloud in group therapy. Those present were then invited to give feedback. And Lou did. She fed-back how profoundly unmoved she was by Ameera’s crocodile tears over her boyfriend’s death a full ten years ago (they were together for two months and he died choking on a bagel, leading Ameera to stave off carbs forever, she alleged):

“Sometimes memories are just too painful to revisit each day, each meal.”

“Or, sometimes a spade is just a lying spade and you can’t ‘speak from the I’ to say so.” Lou had retorted.

This turned out to be the last straw amid Lou’s stack of critiques. Lindiwe, the attendant therapist, had told her to go upstairs and engage in some mindful colouring while the rest continued. But they would revisit this on Friday.

“Make no mistake.”

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And Friday had come, in its interminable way; this time bringing the revocation of Lou’s speaking rights until she could learn to “listen without judgement”. So, folding her arms and sitting back in her seat (then leaning forward again when this pose outlined her stomach), Lou resolved to judge them silently instead. She surveyed the room, chair by chair, body by body.

There was Isa, who spouted American platitudes learned from endless sitcoms played at clinics back in Amsterdam; her buck teeth on display in a rarely holstered grin. She was immediately placed on Couch Rest upon arrival, her parents having fudged her true weight in the forms, which was far lower than permitted in this facility and rather more suited to a hospital bed. Isa wasn’t allowed to move all day, for an indefinite number of weeks, until she’d gained.

Next to her was Andre, the sole male in the group, who required two chairs for support. He did little but charm the nurses for TV remote privileges or talk interchangeably about rugby or hunting in his native Namibia, while lusting after Alice.

Alice did little of anything, from what Lou could see, having barely missed the couch herself.

Moira, or ‘Sister’, as she was known for taking the veil back in Ireland, was a woman of appetites; somewhat inconveniently also a sex addict. This didn’t seem to cause much of an internal conflict for her.

Lotte was in constant conflict, although with others. She claimed it was because she was Danish and therefore “culturally blunt”, but said it could be the autism. Or the Borderline Personality Disorder. Or bipolar. Or a combination, depending on the level of offense caused.

Despite her beauty, Yasemin seemed particularly offensive to Lotte, ostensibly due to a professed worship of her nation’s leader. Lou suspected the true complaint was less about Putin and more with Yasemin’s knack for securing smaller portions by flirting with the chefs.

Ameera, who now openly glared at Lou, was a young housewife-to-be from Dubai looking to launch a luxury skincare line but needing a rich husband to finance it. Before any such dreams could be permitted, she first needed to stop throwing up all of her (very expensive and hard-earned) food, her father had warned.

Rachael was a burnt-out 24-year-old—also from London—with a social media empire to run and not enough time or ‘phone privileges’ to do it.

Glasgow was called Glasgow because she was from Glasgow. Lou never asked her real name.

Completing the ring were Thandi, the head nurse on daytime duty this month; and Lindiwe, the senior therapist, who typically presided over Community.

And this was the hungry band of hopeless hopefuls to whom she would now be forced to listen for the next ten nonverbal days.

She was doomed.

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## Day One

Breakfast came promptly at 7.45am – as with every day; only after a communal meditation at 7.15 – another daily obligation. What also seemed obligatory to the a.m. experience were Isa's routine panic attacks, her uneaten corn flakes growing plump in a bath of milk, absorbing the fatty liquid, showcasing her own fate.

"I can't, I can't, I CAN'T," Isa's wails pierced the dining room as she rocked back and forth on nurse Thandi's shoulder, her swollen face offloading excess water weight onto the starched cotton tunic below. They swayed in unison, mother and child, captor and captive.

"Ssshh, now."

"Please don't make me, Thandi. *Please*. Please can I have something else? Anything else. I'll eat toast! Can I please have toast instead? I promise I will eat it. Please."

She begged like someone with a chance. Begging a mountain to please step aside.

"Sssh. Come on. Eat up." The repeated refrain came back and back and back.

"Is she seriously going to do this every fucking morning?" Lotte hissed in Lou's general direction. Sat at one of three adjacent tables, Lotte's back was to the drama but she knew the sight well. Still, she glanced over her shoulder, unable to resist. "Jesus. You'd think they put cyanide in her cereal."

She'd probably prefer that, Lou thought.

“Oh, let ‘er be.” Moira piped up.

“She’s not exactly letting us be.”

“Poor love has only been here two weeks and hasn’t touched a drop o’cows’ milk in twelve years. Since she was eleven, she said. In the grand scheme a’tthings... what’s two weeks *really*?”

Lou was admittedly shocked to hear that the girlchild across from them was twenty-three. She could still pass for eleven. That bitch.

Lotte persisted.

“Two weeks feels like two months in this place. And I mean,” whispering, “She’s always ended up eating it anyway. At least some of it – they make her. We have to. She should too.”

Everyone here was an advocate for justice. Excepting what they could get away with of course. Lotte’s impenetrable logic could cut neatly through everyone’s pathologies but her own, Lou noted. She had recently been found stealing protein bars from the snack trolley, several weeks’ worth; collecting them in her dorm, where they lay untouched and colour coded. Under Rachael’s mattress, mind, not her own.

“And it hasn’t been two weeks, or twelve years. Just twenty-four hours. And it’s not killing her. Not that you’d know from this reaction.”

Moira put up her hands in defeat.

But Lotte wasn’t done. “It’s all for attention. Lou - amiright?”

Lou pointed to the frayed cardboard tag strung around her neck, where the words ‘Golden Silence’ were scrawled in amateur calligraphy.

“Casting a fair-few stones there, aren’t we, Lotte?” Moira tried once more.

“I don’t waste time with shit like *this* anymore,” Lotte’s thumb jabbed over her shoulder.

Lou felt her eyes roll. Just the protein bars, then.

“Everyone wants to be the sickest one here. It’s fucked,” Lotte continued, mashing her muesli and casting another piercing look Isa’s way, which Thandi caught.

“Hey man, what you looking at? Eyes on your own plate! Hey! All of you. I said now-now!”

Lou’s gaze snapped down, then gradually ventured back up towards Andre and Alice, huddled at the other end of Thandi’s table. Yet they were in a different country, all their own.

“Yah, you need to come Namibia when we’re out, Al. I swear it’s so sick in the bush. We’ll hunt kudu... and cure the meat... make our own biltong... sleep under the stars... I swear, you’d love it.”

Would she? Lou wondered at Alice’s capacity to feel much of anything, let alone love. Let alone love of biltong. But Andre carried enough for both of them.

“We could, like, fully *live* out there. Off the land and stuff. I’m pretty good at all that survivalist shit.”

“Sounds amazing,” Alice offered through a tight smile, twirling her spoon. She took small bites in the fleeting moments he looked away, covering her dainty mouth as she chewed.

“Ah shaaame, we just need to get out of here and have some actual fun.” He gave her hard-to-miss ribs an illicit little poke.

Andre’s 300 lbs dwarfed Alice’s 85 as he spilled over his chair, edging closer. His unsated eyes traced over what was left of her; climbed the pretty scars scoring her attenuated arms, silver ladder rungs marking the forbidden way in.

And Alice let him climb. Because it felt good to be wanted. Good enough for someone who had forgotten what wanting feels like. Desire took up too much space, softened your edges, made you a target. But being desired made a pretty stellar replacement. It made her matter, for a moment. Lou remembered when she had momentarily mattered, when his fleeting attentions framed her, allowed her to exist.

Who was she now? Unheard and unseen, and left with half of the world's biggest bowl of muesli to get through.

Behind them, Rachael was fighting with Thandi, who had traversed the room—leaving a now fed but near catatonic Isa—to the third table. Rachael had been banned from phone use for failing to return hers last weekend and taking work calls during the week.

“Thandi! I have a Very Important Business Call to rearrange!”

“Shame, man, but you heard me. Not till next Saturday. Therapists said so.” Thandi's volume refused to match Rachael's, who spoke in vehement whispers. The nurses, having heard it all before, had no shame in such conversations. No secrecy here, not when residents thrived on secrecy and the ongoing allure of *If Only*.

“*Thandi*. For fuck's sake, I'm not a child. I'm a Working Adult Woman.”

Lou doubted many adults referred to themselves as such this often.

“I can't exactly move the pitch meeting to next weekend because I'm in fucking rehab in fucking South Africa. It's Time Sensitive.”

“So are my nerves, man. Eat.”

Rachael grew shrill. “I *need* to be on that call. They Need Me on it.”

But Lou could see the negotiation was over. Everyone could.

“Tough shit. Finish your food.”



They should put that on their website.

## Day Two

Lou was awoken out of the pitch black by a white glare. It intensified and then throbbed in her skull as her eyes peeled open reflexively.

Not today. Come on.

“Come on. *Lou*, man!”

Lou groaned. Her lids snapped shut again.

“Ssshh! Hey, let’s go.”

Diving beneath the covers, she was only momentarily returned to darkness before a rough hand bore down and commenced jostling her shoulder while the unscrupulous torch face came up through a gap between duvet and creaking mattress, illuminating her makeshift den. There was no escape.

Lou sighed. With practised fluidity, she flipped the bedding down and propped herself up, simultaneously swinging both feet around to meet the abrasive carpet while her free hand swept the beam from her now scorched retinas.

Thandi chuckled breathily and then held the spotlight under her chin to ghoulish effect. “Morning, sunshine.”

“Or morning for you and me at least,” she continued loudly once they were out in the too-bright hall, one assured body shepherding the unsteady other. “I’ve been up two hours already,” tapping on the Minnie Mouse Swatch wrapped around a chubby brown arm. 5am. “Yeah! That’s right, you think you got it bad? You’re on vacation!”

“OK sit yourself down here, baby.” Thandi gestured to the toilet stall just outside the nurses’ office, passing Lou a plastic cup with her name on it.

Lou filled a third and let the rest hit the bowl. They only needed enough to test for ketones, meaning muscle-waste. All other liquid was dispensed to keep water-loaders from tricking the scales, which was also why they took a randomised approach to choosing victims of these early starts. You never knew when they were coming for you, only that they would come. A lot of bedwetting occurred after a lot of sleepless nights.

Lou flushed and opened the stall door, handing over the lukewarm vessel.

“Thank you. And here’s to your health,” said Thandi, taking it with a cheers motion.

“And mine, hey? Why’s nobody ever checking in on me, huh, see if I’m OK too? No one cares about poor nurse Thandi. No one’s giving me food... medicine, taking care of me... Psssst. Must be nice.”

Lou smiled and ruffled her hair.

“Hey! Wash your hands, man! *Ackh*, I tell you, these girls...”

After rinsing, they entered the small office. Thandi instructed the night-shift nurse to grab her file while Lou headed for the screen-divider at the far side of the room, behind which she divested her pyjamas and swiftly slipped a stiff hospital gown over hardening goosebumps before reversing onto a set of scales.

“You ready? OK, good girl.”

The night-shift nurse noted Lou’s weight, shielding the clipboard from view with the usual histrionics—as if Lou was actively trying to peer over (she was not)—then sat her down to check her vitals, strapping on the tatty blood pressure sleeve. Lou

waited for the squeeze, the thump of a pulse, the dull thud of her own life to beat through with surprise insistence. She looked out through the sliding glass door that would soon frame verdant hills cascading down into the sea. Thought about sinking into it.

P-pump, p-pump, p-pump.

She noticed a paler line of indigo slicing through the glossy black rectangle, the slightest trace of the coming sun beginning to split the impenetrable dark at its centre, the base of the sky slowly catching alight, like someone holding fire to parchment. About to go up in flames. Another day coming.

“All looks good, man. You’re alive.”

Another day of being alive.

### **Day Three**

Makeup was strictly prohibited, but viewed with equal suspicion was Lou’s failure to break this rule.

“You’ve given up on yourself, Lou? You don’t want to present yourself as womanly, as attractive – is that it?” Lindiwe’s brows convened in the shape of concern. “Shame, my girl.”

Glasgow, however, who arrived a couple of weeks before her, had reportedly suffered a different reaction; crying for a week when first informed of the ban, which merely exposed the lashings of mascara and foundation she continued to apply anyway.

“Ah’ve nay gait any awn ti-dey! Ah proh-mes!” But her face told a different story. Stark white streaks sluiced through layers of burnt umber masking her northerner’s complexion, washing away the last line of defence.

Lindiwe contrived a ‘tasteful make-up lesson’ to teach the ladies how to complement their newly heightened self-esteem with their faces. “You two... should meet somewhere in the middle,” gesturing one polished hand between Glasgow and Lou, the other resting on her chin in a display of deep thought. “You need the goldilocks treatment. Ha!” Turning to Glasgow, suddenly serious. “Speaking of, why are those extensions still in your hair? I do recall asking you to remove them please.”

“I canney without repping mah awn hair too!”

“I didn’t quite catch that, my girl, but where there’s a will there’s a way! You all should know that ... As wilful as they come, to our despair! Ha!”

The result saw everyone sat cross-legged around a bag of purpose-bought cosmetics, showcasing a rainbow of beige. Everyone except Andre. He was excused by the grace of his gender and permitted to watch the afternoon rugby upstairs, where he explained each move to Isa, who was delighted at the company, if not the subject matter. The rest received a similarly forensic tutorial on appearance.

Lindiwe passed the overstuffed pouch to a terrified-looking Alice on her left.

“Alright, let’s choose some bits from the selection that we feel can create a lovely—and *appropriate*—daytime look to make us shine with pride when we’re home.”

Pride permitted; glitter forbidden. Lou fished out a mascara, a concealer and a brown eyeliner pencil, holding them aloft for approval. Lindiwe gave her a thumbs up, so she handed the bag along.

“Sorry, but you can’t tell us how to *look*, Lindiwe,” Lotte objected, studying an eyeshadow palette that ranged from Vanilla to Wheat to Café-au-Lait with evident distaste. “I’ve spent enough time trying to look a certain way as it is.”

“You’ve each spent your time as slaves to extremity. We’re teaching you to live in moderation. Not flit into extremes as you’re used to doing: now starving, now binging; then excessively exercising, another time doing ab-so-lute-ly *nothing*—ha ha!—with no regular life in between... Up and down you go! Quite the little seesaw you’ve been on.”

She said it like they had a choice.

“It won’t do. That’s why I’m showing you the middle way.”

“So, you want us to be beige?”

“I want you to be healthy. To be normal. This is *normal*.”

*This was normal?*

## Day Five

‘Free time’ within the closely-monitored compound was confined to the Common Room, making periods of digestion and diversion virtually indistinguishable. Glasgow was however known to compensate for this foil to her ongoing workout regime, sneaking off in any spare moment to dispense with whatever calories she could beyond reach of the security cameras. Just that morning Lou had accidentally caught her doing pre-breakfast burpees on the rear terrace, which happened to be half in a flower bed.

“Don’t you dare say anything, Lou,” she snapped breathlessly, mud covering her manicured hands as she jumped up yet again, thrusting them skywards.

Lou was spending another afternoon’s break sat upon the floor, leaning against the sofa with some blunt crayons and scrap paper; ostensibly drawing but never quite making a mark. Isa, as ever, sat nearby on the couch, enjoying her newest hobby: a lump of plasticine provided after she’d completed the last of six 1000-piece jigsaw puzzles. Fragile little creatures were now amassing under her furrowed brow as she willed them to life.

“Lou. Hey, Loo-ooou!”

Lou turned, but Isa leaned over to tap her twisted shoulder anyway.

“Lou, did ya hear the news?” Isa grinned.

She hadn’t.

“I can come to Group tomorrow! For my Life Story. I finished it this morning. Well, I mean I finished *writing* it! The therapists told me I could start it on Monday, so I figured maybe... But they were all like... ‘*Blah blah blah* don’t get your hopes up’ and all. But yeah! They say next week I can even join the therapy sessions downstairs with you guys. Not the other stuff, but still! Isn’t that cool?”

Lou wanted to say something about how she would soon be inducted into the same hall of disappointment as the rest of them, but was suddenly glad she could not. She smiled broadly and mimed applause, wanting to see Isa’s hopes go up up up, in the opposite direction of the sub-terranean floor.

“Thank you, why thank you,” Isa bowed. Her busy hands returning to the figures she had been constructing all afternoon. She’d made a variety: a horse and a bird and a cat, whilst presently trying an elephant. Lotte told her it looked more like a penis with legs, prompting Lou to lob a cushion at her head. Isa planned to make a boat for them

next, she explained. A little arc to keep them afloat. She smiled when she said it but it made Lou feel sad, so sad. Always bracing for disaster.

“So, like... do you believe we can ever get better? Like, *fully* better?”

Lou stiffened slightly at the change of tone, then regarded Isa for a long moment, deciding how to respond. After ten-or-so seconds she realised it could only be ‘yes’ or ‘no’ anyway, so opted for the latter.

Isa’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh! How come?”

Lou exhaled as she searched the ceiling for inspiration. But all she found were cracks and stains.

“Oh right - you can’t answer, I guess. Sorry, I keep doing that.”

Another small shake of the head: don’t worry about it.

“Well, *I* do,” wagging a spindly finger, “and you can’t say I’m wrong!” Isa’s smile began to wane as she turned to the window. “I think I can be normal. I’m gonna walk into a restaurant and order a meal – not the biggest thing on the menu but not the smallest either. Just whatever I feel like. Maybe I’ll even have dessert. Then I’ll just walk out again like la-la-la and no one will notice anything. I won’t check myself in the window glass. Won’t think about it, just look ahead, just get on with my day. I have to think that. I have to, or I...” she trailed off.

Lou realised that while speaking Isa had disfigured all her creations, rolling them into dozens of little balls on the coffee table. She then squashed one beneath her thumb and admired the imprint. Lou knew how that worked. Build, squash, repeat. How powerful she was in this one arena. This and only this.

The smile abruptly retook the lower half of Isa’s face. “And hey, you’ll come too, Lou!”

## Day Six

One exception was granted for the order of silence, but hardly one to encourage free speech.

“Call your mother,” came Thandi’s dictation that evening. An ambush.

Shock flooded Lou’s face. After a pause she pointed at her open mouth to signal the futility of this plan.

“You allowed to call and speak to her in my office. Let her know you’re OK. Yes, come on, man. Will be good for you.”

Lou shook her head slowly, maintaining intense eye contact.

“Yah yah, come. Therapists already emailed her to say. She’s expecting you.”

But as Thandi moved towards her, Lou flopped to the linoleum floor in mock-collapse and clutched the nurse’s sturdy legs. Thandi, however, managed to wrest one free and began prodding Lou’s balled-up body with the toe of one shoe.

“Ayyy. Get *off* me you crazy child,” losing balance, “Sheeeesh! The nonsense I deal with.”

There came a prolonged scuffle. But Lou, plasticine in Thandi’s grip, was eventually set back on her feet.

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing bad. You just say ‘Hello Mummy who birthed me and raised me, how are you, I am well, Cape Town is beautiful, everyone is so nice nice, make me so happy happy, thank you, love you, byeee.’ Got it? Easy. I mean, what d’you expect, hmm?”



By the time Lou was old enough to understand anything of the world, her skin felt too thin to weather life's mutilating effects. She didn't want any part of it. *And yet she did, she did.* There were days she tried, tried to be hopeful, trying it on for size. What was the matter with a little expectation? Nothing, perhaps. *Only the weight of it. Only that it's so heavy.* This might be the look and shape of commonplace happiness but surely not how it feels? *What did you expect?* Even at her lightest she was dragged down by more than those cast-iron weights—stolen from her mother's kitchen scale and stuffed in her schoolgirl's knickers—could possibly add.

Listen to the silence for one piercing moment and find it's not so quiet, but filled with a deeper, more disturbing din. The sum of words unsaid amounts to infinitely more than those uttered, which are often not worth much anyway. What a load to carry around. Shedding pounds may do little to compensate by comparison, but it helps. *It has to.* Potential is damning, potential be damned. The space where the right words might be swells instead with disappointments, making a home in the boundless emptiness. Silence is honest and terrifying. Maybe worth its weight in gold after all, seeing as it holds so very much.

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The dial tone called Lou back from her revery. It was unfamiliar, a reminder that great physical distance imitated the existing gulf between them, though the many miles paled.

"Ha-hallooo? Hi?"

"Hi... *Uh-hum*," she cleared her disused throat, "*Hi*, Mum. It's Lou."

“Oh yes, *hello* Louise. How *are* you?”

“I’m well thank you, how are you?”

“Oh, I’m alright, thank you, yes. Yes. Thank you.”

“Good. That’s good.”

Silence.

“And how... is Cape Town? Very beautiful?”

Lou peered through the office blinds. “From what I’ve seen.”

“How lovely. And nice and warm and sunny, I expect?”

“Yup, mm-hm,” she said, pulling her hoody more tightly about her.

“So, are there nice people there? You’ve probably made lots of friends by now.”

“Yeah. Everyone’s nice.”

“Ah that makes me so happy, Louise darling. I just want you to be happy. That’s all that matters.”

“I know. I am.”

“Oh good... Good.”

Silence threatened to creep in, but was quickly intercepted.

“Well, thank you darling Louise, for calling me and letting me know you’re OK.”

“No problem.”

“But I should probably let you go, shouldn’t I? You’re probably very busy over there and have lots to do.”

“OK... yeah. Thank you.”

“OK, good. Well nice to hear from you. Love you darling. Speak soon.”

“Love you too.”

“Alright bye-bye. Bye. Byeee.”

“Bye, Mum.”

Silence, again.

Outside the nurses' office, Thandi was sat on the bench wearing a look of surprise.

"That was quick! Nothing more to say to your own mother? Pssst."

Lou handed her phone over for locker storage.

"Still, nice for her to hear from you, hmm? Make her happy, I bet."

Lou nodded, finally relieved of false words.