

The Conversation

Although she had been blind since birth, lived alone, and rarely ventured into the outside world, Silvia was '*at least protected*' (as her controlling mother called it) within her apartment. However, while speaking amicably to her mother on the phone, Silvia knew instantly that it was foolish to curse in pain when she smashed her toe into the leg of the table.

Here it comes, she thought.

"Are you pacing around again young lady?" her mother said. "A lady in your *condition* should be sitting."

Silvia became silent with rage, mostly at herself, as she had yet to share her rage with her mother. Within Silvia, all the cruel words that her mother ever spoke about her blindness were stirred up by the silence. The sediment that settled to the bottom rose within Silvia's racing heart, contaminating her otherwise-gentle nature.

It's not a condition, she hissed in her mind.

"Are you even there?" her mother said. "Aren't you supposed to be sitting like I told you? I don't know why you insist on learning things the hard way. This is why you should be living with me. Then I wouldn't have to worry. Even Betty, although she has webbed-feet and a thirty-something son living at home with her – never mind about that - agreed that my poor health would improve if you moved back in. All this worrying will be the death of me. You know how I suffer for you!"

It's been five years and you're not dead yet, Silvia thought.

"Are you there? I can hear you breathing," her mother said. "What. Is. That. Sound? Are you *alone*? Young lady, do you have the radio on? You probably have the lights on too, don't you? Why you think the electric company needs donations is beyond me!"

"Mother, I..." Silvia started.

"Oh, so you are there!"

"Mother I...love you."

"Oh, Silvia I love you too. What will we ever do without you?"

Once they hung up, Silvia fell silent. For a minute, she sat there, simply inhaling and exhaling.

"You okay, *Sil*?" Gayle, the landlady and her best friend said.

Silvia heard Gayle put the magazine down and could tell that she was leaning forward as the couch creaked. Although Silvia knew that Gayle had witnessed similar outbursts between herself and her mother, Silvia was embarrassed nonetheless.

"Yes," Silvia answered. "I just don't know why I bother anymore."

Silvia got up and felt her way to the radio hanging from the kitchen cabinet, turning the volume up. She started to feel her way along the wall to the light switch.

"Don't worry, Sweetie, I didn't turn them off."

Silvia smiled.

"I like them on. I especially like forgetting that they're on," Silvia said.
"You don't have to tell me, Sweetie...I know," Gayle said.

"So where's your boy toy?" Gayle asked suddenly.

"Pardon?" Silvia said.

"There's no more pizza boxes."

"How does that make James my boy toy?"

"James! James!" Gayle repeated. "Oh so you *do* know his name. Oh James! I need a *delivery*".

"Oh shut up, Troll! You're such a perv. He's just sweet. That's all."

"Sure he's sweet," Gayle said sarcastically. "So why don't I see taco wrappers lining the table?"

"Gives me gas."

"The taco kid?"

"No. The tacos!"

"What does the pizza boy give you?"

"You're terrible."

"No. I'm happy for you. A little jealous. But happy. You're getting more action than me."

"Nothing's going on, Troll," Silvia said. "Besides, my Mom doesn't approve. She said only someone with the same *condition* could understand."

"If you say nothing is going on, I believe you," Gayle said. "Still, no orgasm after twenty or it's free..."

"Gayle!"

"What? I'm sure he'll throw in chicken wings. Hey, so does he like stamp a card so after every five...Okay! Okay! I am going," Gayle said as Silvia had flung a newspaper in her direction.

Silvia pressed her lips against Silvia's forehead.

"Goodnight, sweetie! Try not to think about your ma."

I wish you were my Mom, Silvia thought, her hand reaching up to touch Gayle.

The following morning, like every other day, the only sound from Silvia's apartment was the radio. She left it on all day, listening to the outside world, news updates every twenty minutes, listening most attentively when the time was announced.

The radio called for an overcast day with a chance of showers. She turned on the lights and felt the stray newspapers on the floor that she had thrown at Gayle the night prior. Although the phone had been ringing intermittently through four news updates, Silvia, with a raspy voice, finally answered it.

"Are you just getting up?" her mother said.

"No. It's just the first time I'm using my voice. You know I live alone, right?"

"What's that rustling? Is that a newspaper?"

The room filled with news updates she had already heard five times. The newscaster's voice washed away both the ebb of silence, and the flow of Silvia's forced and strained words.

American President Barack Obama is urging Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, to return to the peace process...

"In starting the peace process, both Benjamin and Mahmoud have displayed courage in the face of various domestic pressures to the contrary," the American President said. "We ask these two honourable men to display that same bravery by returning to the negotiation table."

The Arab league was more pessimistic on the peace process, calling it fruitless...

After the call, Silvia could hear a faint telephone conversation through the wall. She felt under the throw cushions on the sofa for a glass that she kept near the wall for such instances. Although it was the tail end of the conversation, and John, her neighbor, laboured when he spoke, Silvia could tell that someone was offering to take him to the doctor, but he was declining. He said that Gayle promised to take him. This struck Silvia as odd, as John was terrified of Gayle. He seemed to be assuaging someone's concerns, repeating that if his doctor was unable to visit, Gayle would take him.

The Arab league was more pessimistic...

The following morning, Silvia made her way down the hallway to the garbage room. She was intentionally loud, trying to entice John into a conversation. Usually, Silvia could hear John carefully walking towards the door. Silvia imagined that John's trepidation was due to a potential 'Troll' sighting. Often, when John 'intercepted' Silvia on her way out of her apartment, the mere sound of Gayle's steps (The Troll) resounding through the floorboards above would cause John to retreat into his apartment.

During the five years she lived next door, John had hosted only a single visitor. "It's unusual for a *man* to never have visitors," Silvia's mother would say. However, Silvia found him to be 'nice enough'. He was especially nice to the kids in the apartment building. They all called him 'Uncle John', and knocked on his doors on Saturdays, where he greeted them with a bowl of candy. As Silvia *stomped* back, troll-like, to her apartment, she became slightly disappointed in herself for the times in the past when she avoided him.

Two days later. Gayle had transformed from the 'Troll' into John's 'nursemaid'. Since John had no family, Gayle had taken it upon herself to take care of John as best as she could. She changed his sheets, brought him food and drink. She became a regular *Florence night-and-day-Gayle*, Silvia thought.

Silvia placed her glass against the wall and listened attentively. Gayle was trying to convince an immobile John to go to the hospital. Silvia imagined John, sick and bedridden, pulling up the top sheet to cover up his weight loss.

“You have to go to the hospital today,” Gayle said.

“No,” John said. “I have things to do.”

“What do you have to do today?”

“Something.”

“Can it wait?”

“No.”

“Will you tell me or it’s personal?” Gayle said.

“Personal,” John said.

“I really think that we should go today.”

“Not today.”

“If not today, then when?”

“Maybe tomorrow or the next.”

“I know you don’t want to go. I can’t make you go, but I really think we should go,” Gayle said. “You can’t get out of bed. Yesterday you were at least moving to the couch.”

“I promise I’ll go tomorrow or the next day,” John said.

“You keep saying that and then we never go. We really should’ve gone already. You’re getting worse, not better. I have a wheelchair ready. I’ll go with you.”

“I promise I’ll go tomorrow or the next day,” John said.

“Okay. But no matter what, we’re going tomorrow,” Gayle said.

At times, as absurd as the conversation seemed, Silvia was struck by how it appeared John would be safe indefinitely if he simply prolonged the conversation. And all he had to do was avoid doctors - If he could do these things - he could remain within those walls. It was as if once he opened the doors to leave, an ancient cold would sweep in and snuff out his waning happiness.

After having spent two days in the hospital, John died. The cancer was too far long for the doctors to do anything, Gayle told Silvia. “Deep down, he must’ve known,” Gayle said. “Once he left his apartment, he knew he wouldn’t be coming back.”

Working in relative silence, Silvia helped Gayle clean John’s apartment. Silvia stacked the papers, books magazines, DVDs and video cassettes, making piles for garbage and donation. Occasionally Gayle broke the silence, once pointing out that the urn she held contained the remains of John’s mother and another time commenting on how John’s apartment was like a living album. “Sixty-eight years of a life within these walls,” Gayle said.

The silence remained uninterrupted for close to an hour when Silvia discerned a difference in their silence.

“Gayle, what’s wrong?” Silvia said,
“You and your tingling Silvie-sense!” Gayle said.
Gayle always knew what to say, Silvia thought.
“We’re all human, so it ain’t a biggie, but that pile of yours. It’s all porn!’ Gayle said.”Books, magazines, and movies.”
Silvia felt for the nearby stack, thumbing the spine and running her hands on the glossy magazine..
“That’s a fifty-plus magazine,” Gayle said. “She must have been in the industry for thirty plus years. I can’t imagine doing the same thing for that long. Sil, you think they threw her a retirement party?”
Silvia’s feelings of tension washed away.

“Why won’t it work? Call him,” Gayle asked instinctively.
Silvia turned pale, shocked that Gayle knew.

“Did you know that James plays the guitar?” Silvia asked. “He came over a few times in the beginning and then every other day. He held my fingers so I could strum. I could feel the vibrations in me. They climbed my spine as if it were a spiral staircase. And then he did something for me. Something. Nice.
“What was it like?”
“He said it was like a piece of spaghetti.”
“No. Not him, Sil. You. Your feelings.”
“It was like I was a guitar. He was strumming. But with his tongue,” Silvia said. “He stayed the night. But I haven’t called him since.”
“Why not?”
“Because.” Silvia paused. “Because I’m blind.”
“You are blind, Sil. But not in the way you think.”

Gayle tried to convince Silvia to call James, to take a chance, even though she found it terrifying. Silvia said that she tried calling once but her words failed her. Although he answered the phone, she greeted him with silence. “When I called, all I could hear was my mother,” Silvia said.

Late that afternoon, Silvia accompanied Gayle and her daughter Abbey to the dump. Silvia felt the van rattle across the scale.
Gayle elbowed a slouching Silvia. “Sit up, Sil. This guy’s cute.”
Silvia heard the worker direct Gayle to the bins she would need. He also advised Gayle that the Centre was closing in twenty minutes.

Gayle approached the bin by making a wide turn to back up. Silvia felt the transmission shift from drive to ostensibly reverse, but they did not move.
“Let’s wait until these people leave,” Gayle said.
After ten minutes of both waiting and reassuring Abbey that she could throw out the garbage bags once they finished with the recycling, both Gayle and Silvia grew increasingly worried that the dump was going to close.

“Mommy, how come we’re not going?” Abbey asked.

“Soon sweetie, soon,” Gayle said.

“Finally,” Gayle said as she backed the van up to the bin. But she did not get out.

“What’s wrong, Gayle?” Silvia said.

“I don’t know what they’re doing. They closed one door but they’re still there,” Gayle said. “I don’t want them to see what we’re dumping. Ah, screw this!”

“Mommy, is it my turn?” Abbey said.

“I have to do the recycling first, sweetie,” Gayle said.

Silvia followed the sounds of Gayle’s door opening, followed by the swish of the back door.

Silvia heard the smooth sound of one of four boxes of John’s books and magazines begin to slide down. She furrowed her brow to what sounded like dragging and paper flapping from the open back door. Soon she heard the three remaining boxes thrown carelessly down the bin, followed by Gayle’s voice continue:

”What can I say? I like porn.”

As Gayle climbed into the driver’s seat and slammed the door, Silvia reached over to offer support and Abbey started with: “Mommy?”

Gayle clenched Silvia’s hand.

“Mommy?” Abbey repeated. “Why did you tell those people that you like corn?”

“Everyone likes corn, sweetie,” Gayle said. “Everyone loves corn.”

Later that evening, Gayle came to see Silvia but found her in John’s apartment.

“I just wanted to say goodbye,” Silvia said.

“Oh my god. How did we miss this?” Gayle said. “Another *magazine*. The Secretaries of Europe. I’ll toss this out.”

“Can I have it?” Silvia said.

“Why?”

“Because...” Silvia said. “I’m human too.”

“What will you do with it?”

“Post it up for my mom, for when she visits!” Silvia said laughing.

“Did you want to say anything at the cemetery tomorrow?” Gayle said.

“Will anyone else be there?” Silvia said.

“Just me and Abbey.”

“I’d love to. We could put the urn in with John’s remains.”

Silvia heard her phone ringing through the wall.

“When’s the last time you spoke to your Mom?” Gayle said.

“Probably when I was twelve,” Silvia said, smirking as if she had come to a realization.

“I better get back,” Gayle said. “Do you want to come over for a bite?”

“Thanks, Gayle. But I’m going to head back. I have to make a call.”

“Your Mom?”

“Well, yeah. But first I have to call someone else. I feel like...pizza.”