

No Noise Like Silence

Short Story

Mack Staton

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He sat with his back propped against the big tree, knees bent, looking at what remained of the house. She sat beside him, legs crossed, with her hand under her chin.

“Was a nice house, wasn’t it, Jack?”

“I liked it,” he said. “Much nicer than the one we had in town. Smaller, but nicer. Much nicer. Too bad that damn fool had to go and blow it up—and himself with it.”

“Just be glad we had come out to get the wash or we woulda been gone too.” She thought about it, looked sad, and was quiet for a few seconds. “That’s what he wanted, you know.” She uncrossed her legs and lay on her side, her head resting in her hand. “Why was he so bad, Jack?”

“Born that way, bad egg, Sue. Ain’t no reason for some things.”

“There’s a reason for everything, Jack. Nothing just falls from the sky.” He looked at her and gathered her to him.

“I know,” he said. “I just don’t want you blaming yourself.”

“I don’t blame myself,” she said. Her voice cracked. “Well, I do and I don’t. After all, I did birth him.”

“I’m his daddy,” he said. He diverted his eyes and looked into the distance. The explosion that destroyed the house and the gunshot that killed Bob Rawlings merged inside his head. “I’m his daddy,” he continued, “but that don’t mean I gave him bad genes or nothing like that.”

She cuddled up to his chest and listened for night sounds. She wondered if he knew. Jack and Bob Rawlings had been friends. The boy looked like Bob. Similar shaped face. Same mean, handsome yet quiet profile. They even had the same bowlegged walk and that was more telling than anything. Good thing Bob was dead. She had loved him too much. It was an unstable love, lustful, loud and uncertain. Wrong. Just wrong.

"It's still quiet, Jack." The crickets didn't start back yet, and I don't hear nothing running through the bush." How often she had wanted to tell him, but no sense in ruining things, she thought. Besides, she loved Jack. It took her five years into the marriage, but he grew on her. It took her time to get used to his touch, to accept the taste of his kiss, and time to measure his gaze.

He knew he loved her more that she loved him, but thought that was true in most relationships. At any rate, he knew he couldn't tell her what really happened to Bob. That could never happen. Sometimes when the moon was red and the wolves screamed at the thick country darkness, he heard Bob scream. The scream of an animal. An animal who deserved to die.

A copy of yesterday's 1953 Omaha Review blew in front of them and landed in the smoking debris. It startled her. She jumped. He cuddled her closer and hummed to her. She sang the words. *Hush little baby don't say a word*. She paused and sniffed the air. "Jack, it's flesh, that smell is burning flesh, ain't it?"

"No," he said. "It's sulfur. Sulfur from the dynamite. It's my fault for keeping that stuff. When we moved here I shoulda had that shed torn down. People who lived here before musta been strange folks keeping explosives like that. Just didn't think though. But you know, bad as that boy was, he never liked nothing that went boom. Remember when old lady Roho caught him breaking in her house and shot at him? Blast from that shot gun had him shaking for two weeks. Funny how somebody so bad could be so scared of loud noises."

She eased her hand inside his shirt and scratched his chest. She looked at the ruins and exhaled in dismay. There was a three-foot crater where the kitchen used to be. She fought back tears and continued to gently scratch his chest.

"You think maybe something evil was in that shed, Jack?" She scratched too hard then patted his chest. "Maybe something evil, a demon or something got into our boy?" She paused. "Jack, you sure that ain't flesh?"

He pulled her hand away and sang, *Papa's gonna buy you a mockin' bird*. He stopped and sniffed the air. "Sulfur," he said. "Just sulfur. And there was nothing evil in that shed, Sue.

Boy was always mean. Even when he was a little fella. You know that, hon. Mean. Always mean.”

He couldn't help it, though,” she said. “I mean, it wasn't intentional. The evil, the meanest. It wasn't intentional. Voices told him to do things. Just like with that Thompson girl when he was fourteen. He told me—he said voices told him to push her in. Said there would be silence first, said he couldn't hear nothing for the quiet. A gun could go off, a plane could crash, but he couldn't hear nothing. After the silence, the voices would come.”

“Excuses clutter the world,” Jack said. A door frame, the only standing remnant of the ruins, fell into the heap. He heard it fall. She didn't. *And if that mockin' bird don't sing.*

“Sixteen,” she said. “Only sixteen years old.” He stroked her hair and rocked her gently. They were silent for a full minute before she spoke. “There is none,” she said.

“None what, honey”.

“Intentional evil. We're just sick, all of us. In one way or another, sick.” He breathed deeply but said nothing. “What'll we do,” she said.

“We'll get by,” he said. “We'll start again. This time it'll be better. Got to be better without him.” *I'm gonna buy you a diamond ring.* There was a long silence before he cleared his throat, shifted his weight and said, “I'm glad he's dead.”

She started to speak but couldn't. Her forehead wrinkled in deep thought. They sat quietly, motionless for a long time. Finally, she began to cry, then him. There was the sound of crickets again. An owl hooted. The wrinkles in her forehead relaxed. She could not verbalize what he said, so she said nothing. She snuggled closer.

When the morning came and the birds sang, she was still not able to say what he had said, but she lifted her head from his chest, almost managed a smile, and said. “Yes, things will be better this time.”