

Several Silences

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It is time, then, to speak: and I will speak for the bones of the mice under the floorboards who scabble in the night and keep you awake and then go suddenly silent for good, whose silence pleases you and leaves you smiling; and I will speak for the song of the birds in the backyard trees that wake you too early, whose hesitant trills and sharp calls make you rage, who flee when you bang at the bedroom window but return, or are replaced, each time; and I will speak for the furniture under the oilcloth in all the unused rooms you forbid me to enter, but at which I peek now and again through cracks in the old doors, and which look like the dried-out corpses of strange beasts, wooden bones poking at the skin thrown over them, and to which I dream, each time, of saying a prayer; and I will speak for the old car slumbering in rust and moss in the garage, whose key you lost somewhere and for which you blamed me, reminding me of your prodigious memory, of your precision and exactitude, for which they had called you, and not me, to Bletchley Park, near the end of the war, asking you to do your bit, which you did, and with pride, ensuring our good name and our legacy, or so you said; and I will speak, then, for the first time since you came back north, seventeen years of silence on which you never commented, it seeming only right and natural to you, I suppose; and I will speak for all these things, in their place and in their favour, and you will listen, because as the adage goes, the ears have no lids; and I see the growing panic in your eyes as you shift around on the chair where you are bound, just as I am to mine, where those two men left us after clearing out what they could, the china and the jewelry and the nicer bits of furniture, a good eye those two had, and they left us on these two familiar chairs at the table in the kitchen where we would sit each day after I had made the coffee, where you would pass me the notebook in which I would record the exact quantities of coffee, of milk, of water consumed while you told me that you hadn't slept a wink again, told me your nightmares of the birds at the window, pecking their way in; and now you might feel as I would feel then, each morning, the sheer constraint of being addressed without recourse, which will only intensify, I can warn you, as the day wears on; I would pass slowly downward into exhaustion as I recorded the little walk to the shop, the money spent and the items bought, as I recorded the temperature and humidity, as I recorded the items of post received, the letters with their measurements, their length, a brief summary of contents—though gradually over the years they became fewer and fewer, more often circulars and advertisements, nothing personal—and I would record each of these things in its proper notebook, marked on the front with a little label, and you would check and double-check and chastise me if I made an error, and I would dream of asking you, of telling you, to do it yourself if it was so important and if I, as you insisted, lacked your attention to detail, your skills at observing minor details and establishing regularities and patterns, consistencies and deviations, from which, you said over and again, everything became possible, through which there was nothing that could not be placed within control; and I didn't protest at all except with my silence, which you took for compliance and support but which was in fact my only means to withdraw, to not play my part to the fullest; and was I waiting perhaps for a moment like this, maybe I was gifted with the foresight that is attributed to the mute and the meek, the reward for all

the willing victims who are told their time will come, though they are not told when; and mine is come in the guise of two young men with deep and darkened eyes and black clothes and sharp gestures, victims too no doubt though not at all reconciled to it, young men whose accents put their homes at some remove from here, homes that are lost or forgotten or fled or pined for or rejected or detested or some combination of all these things; and this was your nightmare no doubt, these two young men of uncertain origin coming into the house at night, you conjured it up time and again, the image of the invader, and I thought perhaps it was your time in Bletchley that had given you this mania, though of course you told me nothing about it beside the banalities stripped of all content and detail, so proud you were of those contracts you signed and the commitments you made to a silence of your own, and proud too of what it all represented, you said that you had done what was right and necessary, that perhaps one or two of the ships and submarines sunk out in the channel before they could do any harm were thanks to your skills, the skills they had sought out, coming north to find you, the man in the brimmed cap and the long jacket coming to the door of this very house, knocking patiently in the dark and the rain one evening, only a year or two after father died and left us this place, and you sent me to answer and I welcomed him in and made him tea while he talked to you at the kitchen table, this very table, both of you pretending I wasn't there or perhaps genuinely forgetting my presence, so quiet was I going about my tasks, filling the kettle and lighting the hob, trying to surreptitiously move the unwashed dishes from the counter to the sink, as I should have done earlier, straight after we'd eaten, and as I moved slowly, fussily, at my tasks, I listened to him explain to you, in rather serious tones, that you were needed, speaking with a kind of forced solemnity that you immediately adopted too, in assuring him that you were willing and able, you would do *everything in your power*, that it would be *an honour to serve* (I still remember these platitudes with the same revulsion that struck me then, that made my hands tremble as I wiped the side with a dishcloth, trying to keep my back to the room, keep my face hidden so neither of you would see my expression), and it was all very quick, the next day you were packed and we said farewell, you were putting on a brave face, or rather you were putting on the face of someone who was putting on a brave face, because I knew that this was the realization of a dream you had long cherished, the moment when finally you could adopt the pose you'd imagined and rehearsed all through our childhood, that you'd approximated, day by day, but always fallen short of—the pose of one called upon to do their duty in the name of a higher cause, one whose *responsibility was to the realm*, as you put it that morning, comforting me, because of course I must need comforting, and it's true I was quiet that morning, I was thinking a lot about myself, I wasn't giving you the attention you desired though it seemed to make no difference to you, I was thinking about what I would make of this time opened up for me without you there to shape and to seize it, to channel it and constrain it, without you, above all, to make sure that everything was recorded neatly as it should be, everything taken down in its appropriate notebook, stored in its appropriate file, and would it be possible, I asked myself, watching you climb into the back of the car with a last, studiously sorrowful glance back at me, to stop, would it be possible to collect the post from the doormat without itemizing it, to buy things from the shop on a whim and never add up the money spent, to go a single day without that final reckoning, sat

in the low lamplight of the study, listening to your pen scratching nearby, writing down what had happened, exactly as it had happened, knowing you would scrutinize it all—but you know the answer, don't you, I don't expect you to nod, don't expect you to give me a sign, though I know you're listening, only pretending to have fallen asleep in the hopes I'll give in, you know that it wasn't possible for me, that it was too late, there was no part of myself, or so it seemed, held in reserve through those years after our father's death, when you exacted from me the necessary tribute of continuing this tradition, transmitted down from him, and to him from his father, and to his father from his father's father before him, patrilineal to the nth generation—until of course it terminates here, we won't impose this legacy of endless spilled ink on anyone—and when you left, yes, it was too late, impossible to resist the compulsion, impossible to put down the pen; but nevertheless I dreamed, for the first six months at least, of leaving entirely, of fleeing under cover of night, never to be found; I dreamed of the empty ledgers yellowing on the hall table, in the drawers of the desk in the study, their blank pages left forever virgin and unsullied, dreamed at last of you returning to find—nothing, to find emptiness and absence without evidence, without records and memoranda to shore up the fissures, nothing but the void of time passed without witness or amanuensis, irrecoverable; and what strikes me now, telling you this at last, this dream that came and went during your first six months in Bletchley, a dream that would have itself vanished with me had I continued to maintain my silence, it strikes me that I never once had an image of what would become of me: I only saw my absence, represented in those blank pages, represented through your bereft or indifferent face on returning (which one depended on my mood), the war won but something else lost, a more fundamental defeat for you, perhaps, and this was my dream, nothing but the presence of an absence, and as for me, I disappeared, over the horizon somewhere; and I realize now that in this respect the dream came true, in spite of everything, because my dream was not of some particular future, some mode of life that I hoped for, some place I wanted to reach and to inhabit, things I wanted to do or people I hoped to know and to love; the dream was simply that I would be *missing*, wherever I was in actuality, that I would be like the purloined letter, if you remember that story, the letter that was hidden in plain sight; and perhaps I realized that to achieve this I didn't need to move at all, I could stay completely still, stay sitting at the kitchen table in the morning, sit in the study in the late afternoon, go to the shops every Thursday for bread and milk and eggs, appear to be exactly what I always have been, always would be, and yet be *imperceptible*—indeed, what easier way to go missing than to convince everyone they know exactly where you are—and though I didn't realize this, didn't think it at the time, this is what I did, the perfect solution came to me, that morning you came back, it was a few weeks after VE Day, I'd watched the parties out in the streets from the bedroom on the top floor, and it felt like it was a celebration for you, for you and all those like you, who mimed fear and did their duty, and then you were back, triumphant, ready to pick up everything again with a new sense of purpose and vitality, you found everything in order and to your satisfaction, spent a few days checking over the notebooks and diaries and records, looking for omissions and inconsistencies—which you found, of course, with glee, reminding me over and over again that I lacked your precision, your detail and attention—and telling me, in suitably vague terms, the part you played in our

moment of greatness, our nation's crowning glory, a few technical details here, loose descriptions of your friends and colleagues there, quite an image, and in all of this you did not notice my silence, my absolute silence that swallowed every word, until it was established, until it occupied every room, inhabited the empty space you left when you too finally fell silent; and sometimes it felt like I'd given in and capitulated, that I'd stopped resisting you and accepted the narrow limits of a life lived between the covers of a book, but I have come to understand that the opposite is true—and this is what I want to tell you, at last, I can hear them at the door now, is it the police, do you think, perhaps someone noticed the smashed window in the sitting room and called them, or perhaps the men are back to finish the job, clear out the rest—no don't be scared, it won't help, let's enjoy these last few moments together, because I suppose now nothing will be the same—what I want to tell you is that my silence was my victory, I withdrew that part of myself that could exist only as living speech, as breath in the air of a dusty room in dim light behind curtains closed to the midday sun; I kept this for myself, none of the notebooks will ever show it, it will never be coded, inscribed, fixed and framed, never set down in the archive ready to be consulted by those future generations that we know now will not be ours, will not belong to us, will see us from without, with a cynical eye or a thirst for the mundane detail, for period context, that is all you will be, at last, for all your heroism, for all your contributions to the history of a people, the victory of a civilization, you will be remembered only for what you can offer them: a little detail, a little precision, nothing more—and then we will vanish.