

HUSH

A Short Story
by Richard Swain

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In space, no one can hear you scream.

And that's just the way the Mute likes it.

A transcendent being of purest tranquillity, it glides silently from one corner of the universe to the next, quietly adoring the never-ending beauty of creation. Just try to picture all of what it must have seen along its travels: all those planets, and stars, and suns, and moons... an artful, impossible landscape against the rich black canvas of infinity, a colourful explosion of natural wonder poured from the paint pot of the Big Bang.

In the cold and the stillness of space, the Mute observes the turning of the universe in absolute peace, admiring the intricacies of its brushwork like a visitor in a gallery. From beyond an invisible glass frame, every supernova and event horizon is just another stroke on the Supreme One's ever-changing watercolour.

Yes, that is what the Mute enjoyed, and that is what the Mute always had.

Complete and utter bliss.

That is, until it discovered the Planet Earth.

There may be a lot of wonder in the universe, but there is not a lot of life. And certainly none as *noisy* as the species known as mankind.

Passing through the Milky Way and disturbed by the loud rumble of humanity, the Mute stood back and watched us from afar, as if we were the focus of a wildlife documentary.

It saw people, normal people, just going about their daily lives. A busy street of city-goers: some on their way to work, some heading out to the shops, some simply tourists exploring a new and exciting land. An incomprehensible, undeniable murmur of speech punctuated the air. The

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Mute was not used to its exhibits *communicating*. It turned to look in all different directions: people talking on their phones, people laughing and joking over tables, people shouting in the street for no discernible reason at all. It didn't matter where the people were, or what their purpose for it was, they all had one thing in common.

They were all making a sound.

As the Mute attuned itself to this new phenomenon, the murmur grew louder and louder, soon becoming a ceaseless barrage of human noise...

And that is when the unseen, unknown voice of the Mute spoke out.

CONVERSATION. SUCH A DISGUSTING TRAIT.

LOOK AT THEM ALL, TALK, TALK, TALKING.

**THE WRETCHED VERMIN OF MANKIND WITH THEIR
INCESSANT, PIERCING, UNENDING NOISE.**

**WHAT GIVES THEM THE RIGHT TO GO ABOUT AS THEY
PLEASE, POLLUTING THE VASTNESS OF INFINITY WITH THEIR
PERPETUAL PHONIC FILTH?!**

**AND FOR WHAT? A SLICE OF INANE CHIT-CHAT OVER
COFFEE AND CAKE? TO FILL THE GLOBAL AIRWAVES WITH
INCONSEQUENTIAL DRIVEL? TO PREACH THE PREPOSTEROUS TO
THE FOOLISH?**

No.

THIS IS ALL COMPLETELY UNACCEPTABLE.

**THE UNIVERSE CAN TURN A BLIND EAR TO THIS ABUSE NO
LONGER.**

LANGUAGE IS HUMANITY'S GREATEST ASSET.

LET US SEE HOW THEY COPE WITHOUT IT...

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No one quite knows what happened next, but it was as if a pale, slender index finger was raised to the centre of a woman's mouth, her pursed lips dripping with the deepest red.

Then, softly, but powerful enough to echo through the furthest reaches of our galaxy:

SHHHHHHHHHHHH...

The noise was no more.

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[Universal space date 11:1-9]

"The Day the Earth Stood Silent"

My name is Francis Ling, and I remember that terrible day all too well.

It had started just like any other.

My alarm clock rang at 06:30 and I woke up with a yawn, despondent at the thought of yet another day at work. The spines of my spiky black hair were limp, having been flattened by my head on the pillow, itself now wet with a layer of saliva caused by my drooling in the night.

Needless to say, I was not a pretty picture.

Reluctantly, I rolled over in bed to flick on the radio. No sound came out of it. But I didn't think anything of it at the time. I fiddled with the volume and the signal to try to turn it up, but I had no success. Eventually, I gave up and forced myself onto my feet.

A few minutes later, I shuffled into my living room, a cup of tea in my hand and a pair of rotten old slippers on my feet. I perched myself on the edge of the sofa and picked up the remote control with my free hand. With a gentle *click* I turned on the TV. The screen flashed on, and just like every other morning at this time, I was greeted by a well-dressed newsreader sat at a desk. Looking smart in his suit, tie, and perfectly groomed haircut, I wondered how he managed to

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scrub up so well so early in the day. Heck, I just wondered how he managed to be awake so early in the day. I must have had an extra three or four hours sleep than him, and I looked like total shit.

Something was different about this morning though. The newsreader was moving his lips, reading out the headlines, but there was no sound to be heard. First the radio, and now this? I was more than a little confused. I fiddled with the volume controls but, again, to no avail. Before I could try anything else, the metallic *pop* of the toaster caught my attention from the kitchen. Taking my cue, I got up and left the room.

If only I'd stayed a split second longer and hadn't turned my back to the TV, I'd have seen the newsreader trying desperately to converse with some of his crew members, becoming increasingly agitated and panicky.

I had started buttering my toast when I noticed a yellow post-it note I had left myself on the fridge, scrawled out in my messiest handwriting:

CALL ELIZA!

Ah, Eliza. My one true love.

With half a slice of toast in my mouth, I took the note and crumpled it up in my palm. With the other, I lent down for my mobile phone (which I had conveniently left sitting on the work surface). I scrolled through my list of

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contacts until I reached the familiar, flattering photo of my beloved. Her short red-dyed hair, her pierced lip and nose ring, the butterfly tattoo on her neck. She was so much cooler than I was. How she'd fallen for a loser like me, who had failed to be somebody in my homeland of China and seemed to be failing even more as a wannabe Englishman, I never did understand. But I didn't care. Love works in mysterious ways, and who am I to question its judgement?

Swallowing, because I still felt nervous talking to her even though she's already mine, I rang her number and put the phone to my ear. While I listened to the usual *ring, ring, ring* I chomped away at the half-eaten toast in my other hand.

I couldn't see the other end of the phone, of course, but I imagine Eliza was also in her kitchen at this time - probably sat neatly at her table rather than slumped against the fridge like me. She'd have glanced up from her bowl of fruit and fibre cereal as her phone began to ring. She'll have looked at the handset, seen my name and photo, thought "boy what a handsome fellow!", and answered with a girlish grin. Or at least that's what I normally tell myself, anyway. Except this time, when she put the phone to her ear and moved her mouth to respond, something very different would have happened.

Because, rather than her usual chirpy greeting, I heard *nothing*. The

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crackle of the phone line was unquestionable, but no human voice spoke out. I began to grow concerned, and went to speak out myself.

And that's when I too said nothing.

My mind was telling me to speak.

My lips were moving.

But no sound emerged, no matter how hard I tried.

I spoke, and I spoke, and I spoke again. But against all of my might and willpower, there was *nothing*.

Eliza must have been having the same problem. Though I could hear no words, I could hear her starting to panic. She would have been getting herself in a state, trying to shout down the receiver and get me to hear her. Panic soon turned to the unmistakable blubbering of tears. Neither of us could take this torture for much longer.

It was Eliza who gave in first and hung up.

I was left standing there in shock and disbelief. My eyes were fixated in front of me, gazing into nothingness. I placed my hand upon my throat, where my larynx would be, dropping the slice of toast in the process.

In this moment of dreaded realisation, it was as if time screeched to a standstill. The half-eaten toast fell gracefully to the floor in slow motion before landing with an almighty thud, butter side down. This snapped me out of my trance and I gulped in horror

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as adrenaline and fear began to pump vigorously through my system.

Fretting, I rushed back into the living room and looked at the TV. This time, I saw the uproar scrolling across the screen.

BREAKING NEWS: HUMANITY SILENCED

We have received numerous online reports that people all across the globe have lost their voice...

My hand picked up the remote with lightning speed, my fingers racing through every other channel on the air. They were all either transmitting the same dooming news report, or a normal television broadcast with no sound whatsoever.

I grabbed my phone again. This had to be a hoax, surely?!

This time, I didn't dial. I went straight to social media. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr. All full of worried, frightened messages, all crying out for help. A hashtag united the world in stunned silence: *#LostMyVoice*.

The reality was sinking in now, my vision darting from the screen on my phone to the screen on the TV, both sets of glare reflecting off the clear, dull glaze of my water-filled eyes.

And that is what I remember of that terrible day. The day the world as we knew it ended forever.

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Dear Readers, today marks a year since the start of the Hush.

Usually an anniversary is a day to celebrate, but today we must reflect on the progress and the horrors we have faced during this global crisis. As I sit here now, slightly older, typing away into the dying remains of a computer, the world continues to turn around me. But it is not a world of prosperity.

For those of you who have not been following this blog, I have made it my duty to record an account of every single day that has passed since our voices were taken from us. Now that our speech is gone, our writing is more important for communication, and for our survival, than ever before. Every day of our lives is precious and I do not want one single line of mine to go erased and unspoken.

One year ago today, I woke up on the Day the Earth Stood Silent, and I witnessed the chaos unfold.

Planes crashing down from the sky with no transmissions to guide them.

People in desperate need of the emergency services with no way to call for help.

Hearts breaking at the thought of never again being able to tell someone you love them.

Oh, my dear sweet Eliza.

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We often used to wonder what a world without electricity or the internet would be like. But we never stopped to think what a world without our *language* would be like.

Turns out, it's a whole lot worse.

Millions have died over the last 365 days, all because they could no longer speak up, or be warned of the dangers that lie ahead of them. Those of us who do live on, we are the lucky, and not for one single second should we take that for granted as we did with our speech. My parents always used to tell me that you never truly miss something until it is stolen away from you - and oh, how there is so very much that I miss right now.

Oh, and in case you're wondering: the voice you are hearing these words in? It's not my own. It's just the voice inside your head. It sounds so *real*, doesn't it? No one has heard a real human voice for what feels like forever. Who knew that an imaginary sound could be so comforting? Even in the darkest of times, the human spirit never ceases to surrender or amaze.

But, I have to wonder: how long until that voice, too, is silenced?

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Fifty years later, a small child would be sat alone at his computer screen, looking at the blog of Francis Ling. He had never known the miracle of speech, and as the

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generations had passed, writing had now also begun to deteriorate. The author's name on the screen was deemed too complex a script for the computer to handle. With a crackle and a glitch of letters, it was rewritten and crudely translated: '*Lingua Franca*'.

Though struggling to understand every word, the child read on...

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Years, maybe decades, even centuries from now, people will be reading this message. New generations will be born without ever hearing the sound of their mother's voice. And if they cannot hear, how will they learn? Today's writing will surely someday be too complicated to understand. I can only hope that some new form of language replaces that which we have lost, for without it, we are nothing. Maybe one day, by some miracle, our voices will come back to us. Maybe they haven't just disappeared. Maybe they're still out there somewhere, lost amongst the universe.

But until then: shush me all you want.

For I will not be silenced.

*

Francis, now an old man, lay solemnly on his deathbed. His once-black hair was now grey, adorned with more bald patches than stylish spikes. Just as he had done

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fifty years ago, he was laying under the covers, his head slightly damp from a drool-soaked pillow. But whereas he was reluctant to get up before, now he wished more than anything that he had the life and the energy to do so. For this time, there would be no coming back.

Eliza, her bright red hair now also greyed by the passing of time, sat by his side, weeping into his wrinkled hand. Pulling his arm away gently, Francis reached over to his bedside table and, with a nervous quiver, handed a folded-up piece of paper to his beloved. Eliza took the note from between his trembling fingers, bursting into a flood of tears as she read the message inside which was written in his best, shaky handwriting:

I love you forever.

Eliza, still unable to muster up any speech, mouthed her reply back to him:

(I love you too.)

Satisfied that he had expressed his feelings and done all that he could with his life, Francis closed his eyes for the very last time.

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Even in death, my words will live on. Hear me people of mankind. May our spirits never be hushed...

[End of blog]

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One hundred years later.

An astronomer - not that there was much call for the profession any more - stood working outside his observatory on a still, silent night. Wearing a long white coat and brown fingerless gloves, he pointed a strange scientific apparatus up towards the starry sky, somewhat resembling an antennae and a satellite dish attached to a large piece of recording equipment. He had a pair of big, bulky headphones pressed against his ears - partly to keep them warm, but also to listen out for any signs of life emanating from distant regions of space.

Unfortunately, just like every other night, he heard nothing but the odd crackle.

Disheartened, the astronomer gave a sigh, ready to give up and dismantle the machine.

Then, suddenly, he heard it.

A strange signal he had never heard before. It was faint, and it was far away, but it was *something*.

Elated, the astronomer hurriedly noted down the co-ordinates of his discovery and raced back inside the observatory. Hooking up the apparatus to a much bigger satellite dish, he twiddled and turned all manner of dials until the quiet whisper grew into a shout, echoing across the furthest reaches of the galaxy.

But what he had expected to be the unearthing of an extraordinary new alien life form was something far more familiar than he could ever have expected.

'Help me!' cried billions of voices, all at once. *'Please, help me!'*

Voices the astronomer had never heard before, and yet he felt he had known all of his life.

In utter disbelief, he ran to a Morse code-like transmitter on the other side of the room, frantically

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punching in a message. With a *clunk!* and a *ching!*, it shot across the elements, before being spat out of something not unlike a fax machine in a different part of the country. The hand of an authoritative figure ripped off the note and stood aghast at the words he saw.

If the writing of the future had still resembled our own contemporary English, this is how it would have read:

OUR VOICE IS FOUND.

And that was the beginning of Operation Babel.

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Official documentation described it in more grandiose terms, but to the lay person, the mantra of Operation Babel was simple.

This was the mission to find our voice.

If it were to succeed, it would require the collaborative effort of every human being on the planet, in spite of one defining language to join us all together. With the communication of the past almost alien to us now, it would prove to be a herculean task. But, by communicating through more simplified writing and sign languages, the remains of humanity would manage to work as one to cobble together a space exploration programme.

It took a long time, of that there is no doubt. Each person had to painstakingly translate whatever resources were left from the days of old into something they could understand in their modern tongue. It was a war of wills and a war of words - libraries became armouries, with Shakespeare, Tolkien, Einstein, and Hawking serving as generals leading soldiers into battle.

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It was a fight they never should have been able to win.

But, against all of the odds, after generations and generations born with the weight of the world on their shoulders, they emerged triumphant.

All across the world, everyone had pulled together to achieve the impossible.

And there, at long last, stood the fruit of the Earth's labours:

BABEL-2.

A ramshackle rocket ship, looming as tall as ten mountains and piercing the heavens like the Biblical tower to which it owed its name. The vessel that would take humanity out into the stars, in the hope of reclaiming what was rightfully theirs.

With the operation having fallen into place, a team of the Earth's finest astronauts were assembled and trained for the monumental task ahead. Building the rocket was only half the battle - finding their voices, and bringing them home, was the real challenge yet to be faced. But to have even come this far, to have forged a world united by its shared lack of language, was a victory that could not go understated.

The day of reckoning finally came, and as the moonlight fell, the astronauts walked with slow determination across the grassy hilltop, adorned in makeshift spacesuits and holding their helmets at their waists. Upwards they climbed, the rocket base awaiting them in the distance, still slightly obscured from view until they reached the very top. Side by side, they stared out towards BABEL-2 on the horizon - the culmination of humanity's greatest efforts - and beyond it to the purple sky above.

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As they prepared to leave the Earth, they took one final gaze up at the stars, which now shone with a glistening hope that lit up the cold darkness of night in a way they had never done so before.

And there, the grand frontier of space, stretching out before their very eyes. That is where their epic voyage would take them.

That is where the voice of mankind awaits.

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Whether Operation Babel was a success, and whether the astronauts were able to recover our language from the Mute, is a story for another time.

But you already know the outcome of their journey, for the truth is hidden in plain sight.

If you understand these words, and you have understood this tale, then that is reason enough to believe that, somehow, someday, humanity was able to find its voice again...