



Filling the Silence

by Cat Lady Firebird

It's cloudy tonight, artificially keeping the temperature and humidity high, even after sunset. Condensation drips down the outside of Lee's apartment window, rendering both the outside view and the internal reflection blurry instead of clear. There's a distinction between the outside world and his surroundings tonight, but it's fuzzy and nebulous, not easily defined. The sounds and lights from out there are muffled and hazy, and in here?

In here, it's just silent. With a sigh, Lee lets the curtains fall closed. His feet ache. He's been standing at the window longer than he meant to, his thoughts endlessly chasing themselves around inside his head, but ending with no more conclusions than he'd had before. Moving around hasn't helped. All it gave him was a momentary distraction from that silence, the one that permeates the entire apartment, mocking him with its very presence.

He returns to the couch, picking up the glass from the coffee table. When he sips, he grimaces. It's water. Not his usual, especially tonight. In previous years, he's ended up far more than three sheets to the wind on this anniversary. But last year, he'd been in the middle of the debacle with Sonja Chenko and Stemwinder. And this year, he's promised his wife he won't.

There's a strongbox on the coffee table, the one that Amanda gave him this past summer, shortly after he'd uncovered the truth about his parents' murder. He's retrieved at as — as what? A different distraction? An attempt to soothe himself? A reminder that he finally gave his parents the legacy they deserve?

Or is it just picking at a scab, a way to remember just how much he lost thirty-two years ago tonight? Another look at the if-onyms and might-have-beens that litter his past? Evidence of just how little family he actually has?

Tonight, he's been re-reading his mother's autopsy report, and there was a detail that he'd missed the first dozen times: *the uterus contains a fetus of approximately 12-14 weeks' gestational age*. His mother had been pregnant when his parents were mur-

dered in that car crash. Pregnant, and far enough along that they had likely known, or at least had good reason to suspect.

I'm not an only child. I'm just the only one who survived.

It's a gut punch, even now when he reads it through a second time, and his mind can't let go of the possibilities. What if he'd grown up alongside that younger brother or sister? Would there be nieces and nephews now, or would that sibling have, like him, hidden in a loner's lifestyle out of fear? Would *he* even have hidden in that lifestyle, if he'd had someone to bond with through all the changes and moves and upheavals that came with his — their — uncle's career?

This train of thought might be interesting, but it's not necessarily pleasant. It's also pure fantasy, and for that reason alone Lee wants to move on. *That's also not what's really bothering you tonight anyway*, his mind reminds him. He shakes his head, trying to clear it. It might be silent here, but inside his thoughts it's far too loud.

Introspection isn't part of Lee's nature. He needs to do something. But what? Recently, he's been spending Friday evenings at Amanda's, debating the boys about their homework, discussing the latest news over dinner, and then turning his charms on Dotty just to see her laugh. Later, after everyone else goes to bed, he spirits his wife out to the back yard for some time alone. Over the past couple of weeks, Amanda has been wearing her engagement ring around the house. They'll be able to break the news about their marriage soon, at least to her family, and then move on to combining their households.

But tonight's the opening night of the school district's fall student art showcase. Three of Jamie's pictures have been selected for display, and his stepson was given tickets to the reception and banquet. Well, two of them, anyway. He'd shuffled his feet when he'd explained he'd given them to Joe and Amanda.

It's not fair, Lee, he'd groused. You're the one who helped me get started. But I...I really want Dad to see my work. And Mr. Crosby says he can't let me have a third ticket unless he lets everyone else have one too.

He's reassured Jamie that he understands, and that of course the tickets should go to his biological parents. No matter what he might think about Joe, it's a bad idea to put either of the boys into a loyalty bind. He also knows not to interfere in the relationships between the children and their parents. Those are the top pieces of advice in every step-parenting guide he's read.

But none of those guides have warnings about the ache that claws through his insides every time he's reminded of his secondary place in the boys' lives, and, by extension, in Amanda's. None of them mention that this particular pain doesn't subside over time; if anything, it's getting worse as he integrates deeper and deeper into the family.

You knew about the kids before you ever thought about asking her out, he reminds himself now. *Including how important they are to her.*

Regret had flickered across Amanda's face one afternoon, shortly after things became serious. *It wouldn't be fair if I didn't tell you now. I lost a pregnancy after Jamie, and after that, since we already had two, Joe and I agreed that getting my tubes tied seemed like the right thing to do. So, if you've ever thought about having kids —*

No, he'd interrupted. *"Loner," remember? It's fine, Amanda.*

She'd laughed and kissed him, the relief plain on her face. At the time, he'd considered the matter settled. He really never had given the idea of parenthood more than a fleeting thought.

But then he'd started spending more time with Amanda's boys, and he began to understand why parents insist that it's worth it, even when children are at their worst. They have a gift he'll never experience, thanks to all those years he'd insisted he was a loner instead of admitting that he was lonely. Years that could have been spent doing something better —

Grunting, Lee stands up, dropping the documents back into the strongbox and closing it with an echoing thud. He'll go over to the gym, he decides, for a good, hard workout. Taking the strongbox back into the bedroom, he stows it and pulls out his athletic bag. *Sneakers. Gym socks. Sweats. Gloves, so I can hit the heavy bag?*

The shrill of the telephone shatters the silence and makes him jump. He sprints back to the living room, picking up just after the third ring. "Lee! You won't believe it! I got first place in all of seventh grade throughout the whole district, and second place overall! And Dad, oh man, you should have seen the way he grinned! It was amazing, and..."

Lee lets Jamie ramble on about the school exhibition for a while before breaking in. He's grateful that he doesn't have to force any particular expression onto his face; that small reprieve gives him the strength to keep his voice even. "That's great news,

sport! Maybe we can go out for ice cream tomorrow to celebrate. You think your mom would okay that?”

“Oh, yeah, especially if it’s all of us. I mean, well, you and her and Phillip and Grandma and me. Oh. Wait. Uh, I can’t. We’re headed over to Dad’s tonight. It’s his weekend.”

Damn it. He has a copy of Joe’s visitation schedule, but he still hasn’t built up the habit of checking it every time they discuss weekends. He admittedly hasn’t tried very hard, because it’s just one more thing that reminds him he’s not a father and never will be. Nor will he ever be an uncle. The most he’ll ever be is a stepfather.

“It’s all right,” he says out loud. “We’ll have other chances, and they won’t run out of ice cream anytime soon. When will I get to see your pictures?”

“That’s the best part! They’re doing open houses the next two weekends, so anyone from the general public can see them!”

General public. That’s all he’ll ever be, isn’t it? Nothing more than any other non-relative. *Okay, Stetson, that thought was too much. Get hold of yourself.* “Then I’ll take your mom and grandma over tomorrow while you’re at your dad’s.”

“Um. Ah. You know, I’d kind of like to be able to take you myself. Or, at least, for all of us to go together. So...” Jamie trails off. “Do you mind waiting until next weekend?”

Avoid loyalty binds. “No, of course not. But I sure will miss being the next one to see your work.”

“It’ll still be there. And I can’t wait to show it to you!”

Lee’s smiling as he hangs up. Twelve-year-olds aren’t known for being great communicators, and Jamie’s introverted nature makes him more reticent than most. But he made the effort to call him while he was still at the exhibit, before he went home with Joe.

You are important to them and in their lives, he reminds himself. And in hers. They all tell you that, all the time, both in what they say and in what they do. Not to mention, Amanda wearing her engagement ring at home means she’s as anxious to stop keeping their marriage secret from her family — from *their* family? Will that ever truly happen? — as he is.

Even if it does happen, it still won’t be the same as having your own children.

Lee closes his eyes briefly before he finishes packing the gym bag. He can still use that workout. What he has now is more than he'd ever thought he might have, and definitely more than he deserves. He should be grateful, not angry or depressed.

He just wishes that were as easily done as it's said.

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"Okay," says Billy as the next Wednesday morning's staff meeting ends. "That's it for now. Stetson and King, my office, please."

Amanda sends Lee a questioning glance as they follow their division head through the bullpen. He shrugs in response even as he mentally reviews recent events. If it were an assignment, Billy would have kept them in the conference room. He's not able to figure out any alternatives before they get into the office and he closes the door behind them, still without speaking. The silence starts to unnerve him.

"Sir?" asks Amanda after a long, awkward moment.

Billy gestures them to their seats, although he remains standing. "You're both aware that we routinely re-clear everyone who works here."

"Yeah," says Lee. "So?"

"You were on the list that got pulled for re-clearance in the last round, Scarecrow." Billy's gaze flicks to each of them in turn. "And they found something very interesting."

Oh, no. He looks over at Amanda, whose expression indicates she's thinking the same thing he is.

Turning to his desk, Billy extracts a single page from a file folder and hands it to Lee: *Commonwealth of Virginia Marriage Register for Smyth County*. He doesn't need to see any more than that, so he passes it over to Amanda. She, too, only takes a single glance. They both know whose marriage it is.

"February 13th," says Billy. "February. Thirteenth." His voice rises with each word. "You've been married for *seven months* and you didn't tell any of us? Not even me?" He snatches the paper back from Amanda. "Just how long did you think you could keep it secret?"

"Look, Billy," Lee begins. "Don't blame Amanda. It was my idea."

"No, sir. I can't let Lee take all the blame. I agreed to it."

He starts to object, but Billy speaks first. “For the love of everything holy! *Why?* Eyes front, damn it, both of you! Talk with each other on your own time.”

Another awkward silence falls. This is worse than he’d thought it would be. He’d expected anger. He hadn’t expected disappointment, nor had he anticipated how much seeing that disappointment would upset him. But now’s not the time to think about that, so Lee files the information away for another time.

“To protect Amanda and her family,” he finally explains.

“Protect them? According to this check, you’re still living apart! How are you protecting them by *not* being there, Scarecrow? Or are these separate addresses just another lie?” He paces around behind his desk. “The whole damn intelligence community already knows you’re partners and you know that! You stood *right here in this office* and told Doc Quidd that Addi Birol kidnapped Amanda to get to you!”

“Mr. Melrose —”

“Don’t you ‘Mr. Melrose’ me when I’m working up a head of steam! I don’t know what’s worse, having to find out like this or that I now have to do some pretty fancy footwork in order to explain this to the folks upstairs! What were you *thinking?*”

“I guess we weren’t,” says Amanda. Her voice is small, and Lee hates that. Hates that he hadn’t been prepared for the intensity of Billy’s reaction, hates how much this is hurting all of them. “Thinking clearly, I mean.”

“You ‘guess’ right! What am I even supposed to do with the two of you?”

Neither of them knows what to say. This latest awkward silence stretches out several moments too long.

“Answer me, damn it! And is there anything else you’ve been keeping quiet? For God’s sake, you two were in here *together* when I told you your personal relationship’s fine with me. Hell, Scarecrow, I all but ordered you to propose when it looked like you were going to lose her! You didn’t so much as twitch an eyelid, never mind tell me *you were already married!*” He drops down into his chair, hand scrabbling across his desk in search of his antacids. “I don’t know how much clearer I could’ve told you that I would cover for you if it came up, but now? Now, it’s out of my hands and I don’t know if I can do that or not.”

“What happens if you can’t?” asks Amanda in a voice that’s still far too quiet.

“I don’t know that either.” Billy sighs, and it’s the first time Lee’s ever seen him look his age. “Your close rate speaks for itself and it’s not *technically* against the rules,

but in the past, they've always transferred one or the other when two partners' relationship turned personal. Re-clearances are always done outside the affected agent's division, which means other people have already seen this. I have a lot of explaining to do, beginning with why I didn't already know." Now his tone becomes plaintive. "Why didn't you *trust* me?"

The question cuts through Lee's crumbling defenses in a way that yelling never could. "What? Of course we trust you, Billy, we —"

"Then why didn't you tell me? You — you didn't have to do it here, or even on the record at all. Just...all this time I've been working to keep you as partners, and this is how you repay me. Let's not start about what's going to happen when Francine finds out or, God help us all, Harry Thornton."

"Of course they'll be upset." Amanda's tone has become conciliatory. "She's Lee's little sister, and Harry's his father."

Orders or not, Lee turns to look in her direction. What is she talking about?

"I guess you see him as family, too, don't you," she continues. "Maybe as a favorite nephew, or something like that."

"I've wanted to think you saw me the same way," answers Billy. Lee can feel the eyes on him, but he can't look up, especially when Amanda's metaphorical meaning finally hits him.

She sighs. "We really screwed this one up, didn't we."

"Yeah," Lee admits. "I guess we have. What's it going to take to fix this? Within reason. We're not going to get un-married, and neither one of us wants to be transferred or chained to a desk, either."

"At least tell me what's going on with your addresses." There's no more anger in their section leader's voice now. Just sadness and hurt, and Lee hates that as much as he hated hearing it in Amanda's voice. *I guess we have*, he'd said. The remark had been a surrender, a way to try and back down gracefully, but now it echoes in his head.

"We...we're really still living apart, at least for now. It's..." Amanda trails off, her eyes focused on the hands twisted in her lap. "We've wanted to go slow with my mother and the boys, especially since the boys didn't take very well when Joe got remarried so quickly this past spring."

"You mean your family doesn't know either? When are you planning to tell them?"

Not Amanda's family, Lee thinks. Our family. Or, at least, that's how it should be. How it's going to be. He's surprised by the determination of that last thought.

"Soon. I...a couple weeks ago I started wearing my engagement ring at home. Mother noticed it right away, of course, but all she said was that it was about time. The boys agreed with her. Right now it seems like...well, at worst, October third is only a couple Saturdays away. Joe will have the boys that weekend, and Mother's going to be out of town, and we can just tell them that we didn't want the fuss of a big wedding so we just went over to the courthouse, or...I don't know. We can figure that out."

"Your mother is not stupid," Billy tells Amanda. "If she hasn't already guessed, she will, and when that happens, she'll feel exactly like I do right now. You'll deserve it, too, but I suppose that's your personal problem. Field section is mine. I'll see what I can come up with to make the higher-ups happy."

"Thank you," says Lee, and he means it. He's able to meet Billy's eyes as he says that, at least.

"But I'm not going to be responsible for what happens if the two of you don't go ahead and tell Francine and Harry right away." He levels a finger in their direction. "You're right, Amanda: they're not just Lee's friends. They're his family, people he chose as that a long time ago, and they'll keep things on the down-low. Even if they don't speak to him for a while."

Lee glances over at Amanda again, and finds her looking back at him.

"Thank you, sir," she says. "We'll go out and tell her right now, and then we'll go up to the Q-Bureau and call Harry."

"Good. Now get out of here so I can think."

They stand up together, heading for the door, but just as Lee puts his hand on the knob they're stopped by Billy's voice. "Lee? Amanda?"

"Yeah?" he asks.

He's gotten up again, and now, he wraps them into a bear hug. "Congratulations. To both of you. It couldn't have happened to better people."

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Lee's glad he checked the weather before they headed out this morning; while the temperature's still about normal for October in Leicestershire, the clouds are thickening this afternoon. He doesn't need an umbrella right now, but it looks like he'll be glad he

has one later. A few of the weather forecasts have hinted that a fairly strong storm might be developing over the Bay of Biscay, although most forecasters think they'll just have rain overnight.

They've been in England for ten days. The job involves two meetups with a source, eleven days apart. Billy could have sent two different sets of agents on two short trips, or put them on temporary loan to the London office on the days in between. He has done neither; instead, he's sent them over on the Monday after their "courthouse ceremony" with instructions to just stay over and stay out of trouble. When questioned, he grumbled about proper honeymoons not including gunshot wounds or hospitals. Neither he nor Amanda have pressed the point.

This morning has been particularly productive. They've filled up two lined notebooks with information about his extended family, including some information about possible living relatives. After a late lunch at the shopping parade, they're indulging themselves with a walk toward All Saints before heading back down to London. They'll meet with their contact again in the morning, and fly out after that.

Amanda's reading from a tour booklet. "This is Peace Memorial Park," she tells him. "It opened in 1921 after being built with money from public donations, and it has the town's War Memorial. The pavilion was built in '78, and it has sports courts as well as concert space and —"

— *and children running into the street.* Lee's moving before he's completely processed the sight, dashing out after the kid and making a desperate grab before letting momentum spin them both around. Around him, cars screech to a halt, and the loud sound of a horn shatters the pleasant quiet that had been there before. In response, the child starts to cry. He has no idea how to handle this. What's he supposed to do now?

Amanda meets him as he comes back onto the sidewalk, deftly exchanging his dropped umbrella for the wayward child. "Well, hello there, mister. What were you doing all the way out in the street?"

The child's crying becomes wailing as he buries his face against her neck.

"It's all right," she soothes him, freeing a hand to rub his back. "Everything's all right now. You're safe. Where's your mom?"

"Liam? Where are you? Oh, *shit!*" There's a teenaged boy standing at the entrance to the park, his face ghost-white.

"This belong to you?" Lee asks.

“Yeah.” He comes over to take the child from Amanda. “What’d you think you were doing, running away like that? Didn’t you hear Zee Zee tell us to stay within sight?”

“Zee Zee!” cries the child, the tears instantly gone. “Wan’ go see her!”

“In a second.” He turns back to the two of them. “Thank you, so much. I just — he got away from me so *fast*...”

“They can do that,” says Amanda.

“Wan’ go see Zee Zee *now*!”

“Even though she’ll skin both our hides?” He looks at them again. “I need to get him back before he really starts to scream.” He then trots off into the park grounds. Lee and Amanda exchange a single glance before they follow.

Zee Zee turns out to be a middle-aged woman, perhaps a few years older than they are, and she’s visibly frantic as she walks around in ever-widening circles, eyes roaming everywhere. When she spies the teenager, her relief is palpable. “There you are! Charlie, I told you not to get out of —”

“He squirmed free and took off! Shouldn’t I have gone to catch him?”

“Of course, but...” She sweeps the young boy into her arms. “Liam, what have we told you about running away from your big brother?”

“There was a bird, Zee Zee! And it was so *pretty*, and it looked like it was trying to get into the bush so I thought I’d say hello and then it might say hello back an’ we could talk about how it got all those colors into its feathers —”

“It was probably trying to get back to its nest, darling. It also doesn’t excuse you running away from your brother. That was very naughty of you, to scare him so!”

“Not just him,” says Lee. “Us, too. He ran right out into the street. If I hadn’t been there to catch him...” he trails off meaningfully.

“Oh, my,” says Zee Zee. “Well, then, all of us should thank you. Are you Americans? You sound as though you might be.”

“Yes,” he tells her. “Finishing up a business trip.”

“We thought we’d take a walk to look at the church,” adds Amanda, indicating her guidebook and camera. “It’s a good thing we were there when your son ran past.”

“Stepson,” mutters Charlie.

“Responsible adult,” counters Zee Zee in a tone that Lee finds incredibly familiar. “And until your father gets back, the one who’s supervising you and keeping you out of trouble. Liam, if you can’t be trusted, you’ll need to stay right by me.”

“But I wan’ go play!”

Amanda, ever the mother, kneels down in front of him. “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you and I go over to that playground? Your stepmother will still be able to see us, but you’ll also be right next to an adult while you play. If she’s all right with it, that is.”

“Oh, Zee Zee, *please?*”

“I can’t imagine why not,” she allows. “But you mind Mrs. — I’m sorry, I don’t believe I asked your names.”

“Stetson,” says Amanda with a smile in his direction. It’s a smile that reaches through the autumn chill to warm his very bones. Billy was able to work his magic, after all; they’ll be announcing the marriage to the entire Agency when they get back.

“Mrs. Stetson, then. You mind her, or you really will have to stay by me. Am I clear?”

“Yeah, Zee Zee. C’mon, Mrs. Stetson. Let’s go play!”

Amanda laughs as he tows her over toward the swings and slides. Lee watches them for a long moment, smiling and delighted, before he settles onto the bench beside Zee Zee and shakes her proffered hand. “Lee Stetson.”

“Zina Cox,” she replies. “Zee Zee, to the children, since we didn’t like to make them call me anything more formal. You’ve met Charlie, who’s skulking over there hoping he’s heard the end of this. He’s fourteen, though, so he should know better. Liam is just turning four. Their sister Liza is nine. She’s after a bit of shopping with my husband. A birthday present for Liam, actually, but we’d never hear the end of it if we told him ahead of time.”

“You have a beautiful family,” he tells her. “Amanda has two boys. My stepsons.”

“Ah, so you know how it gets sometimes. I’ll have to tell their father about this little misadventure. It was an accident, to be sure, but if their mother hears about it from them instead of from my husband, there could be problems. She’s not a bad woman, but things can become fraught sometimes.”

“Don’t I know it.” He laughs. “I get along with my stepsons’ father most of the time, but there are times I wish I could show him my left hook.”

“It’s hard, when you want to love them as your own, but you mustn’t ever forget they aren’t. Will you and your Amanda be having any of your own?”

He isn’t quite sure how to respond to that. Over on the playground, Amanda and Liam have segued into a game of hide-and-seek, and Charlie drifts over to join them.

“What a busybody,” says Zina after the silence has gone on too long. “It’s none of my business, so you need not answer that. Why don’t you tell me what brought you to Wigston today, instead? It’s not the sort of place where tourists often venture.”

He’s grateful for the change of subject. “Like I said, we’re here on business, although we’ve also had a little down time. We’ve been over at the Records Office, looking for details about my mother’s family.”

“Your mother was from here? But you don’t sound as though you’ve spent much time around English people.”

“I haven’t. She and my father were killed when I was a child. I was raised by an uncle.”

“Oh, you poor dear.” Zina squeezes his hand, and finds he appreciates it rather than being irritated at the familiarity. They sit in silence again, but it’s a silence that’s companionable, is welcome, as opposed to the silence in his apartment last month or the awkward silences in Billy’s office a few days later.

“Perhaps,” Zina eventually says, “I know your mother’s family. I’ve met my quota for personal questions, but would you be willing to say her name anyway? Her maiden name, I mean.”

“Jennifer Hamilton.”

Her face pales. “Jennifer *Hamilton*? Born in...I believe it was 1920? Daughter of Leonard and Grace?”

“You *knew* her?”

“No, I never met her that I can remember. I’m not that old. But yes, I know of her.” She’s holding a hand to her throat. “Oh, and I’m standing at the foot of my own stairs. All this time looking, and then Jennie’s son sits right down next to me in the park one day. But of course you’re confused. Let me explain: my maiden name is Zina Hamilton.”

Lee feels his jaw drop open.

“My father is Jennie’s older brother. He knew she’d married her American soldier when she ran back into him across the pond. The next thing our family heard, she and her husband were killed in a car crash. At the time, we’d figured everyone was gone. It wasn’t until some years later that my grandparents found out otherwise, but by then you were already with your — your step-uncle, was it? They were never able to confirm his name or his whereabouts, which is why they never contacted you.”

“Uncle,” clarifies Lee. “Well, half-uncle, which is why we have different last names. My grandfather was struck by lightning, not too long after he’d come back from World War I. My father never had any memory of him. When my grandmother married again, her husband raised him as his own son, along with the one they had together. My uncle’s career Air Force, so we moved around a lot. That would have made things more difficult for your — for *our* grandparents?”

“I suppose this does make the two of us into cousins, doesn’t it? All these steps and halves get confusing after a while, especially when you choose to love someone who’s not your blood. The way we have, as stepparents.” Zina shakes her head. “You must have been so lonely, growing up without much family. My father’s parents never stopped looking for you, all the way up until the day they died.”

“It’s...it’s good to know they did that. I...yeah, it was rough, but I survived.”

“And created a wonderful family of your own. You should be proud.”

He nods, swallowing around a lump in his throat.

“Oh, but my father would be so happy to meet you. Jennie’s son, here at long last. Are you and your wife here long enough to come to tea? I’ll ring him and ask if he’ll join us.”

“Yes,” Lee tells her. Then he stands up.

“Amanda,” he calls, “there’s someone here you should meet.”

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