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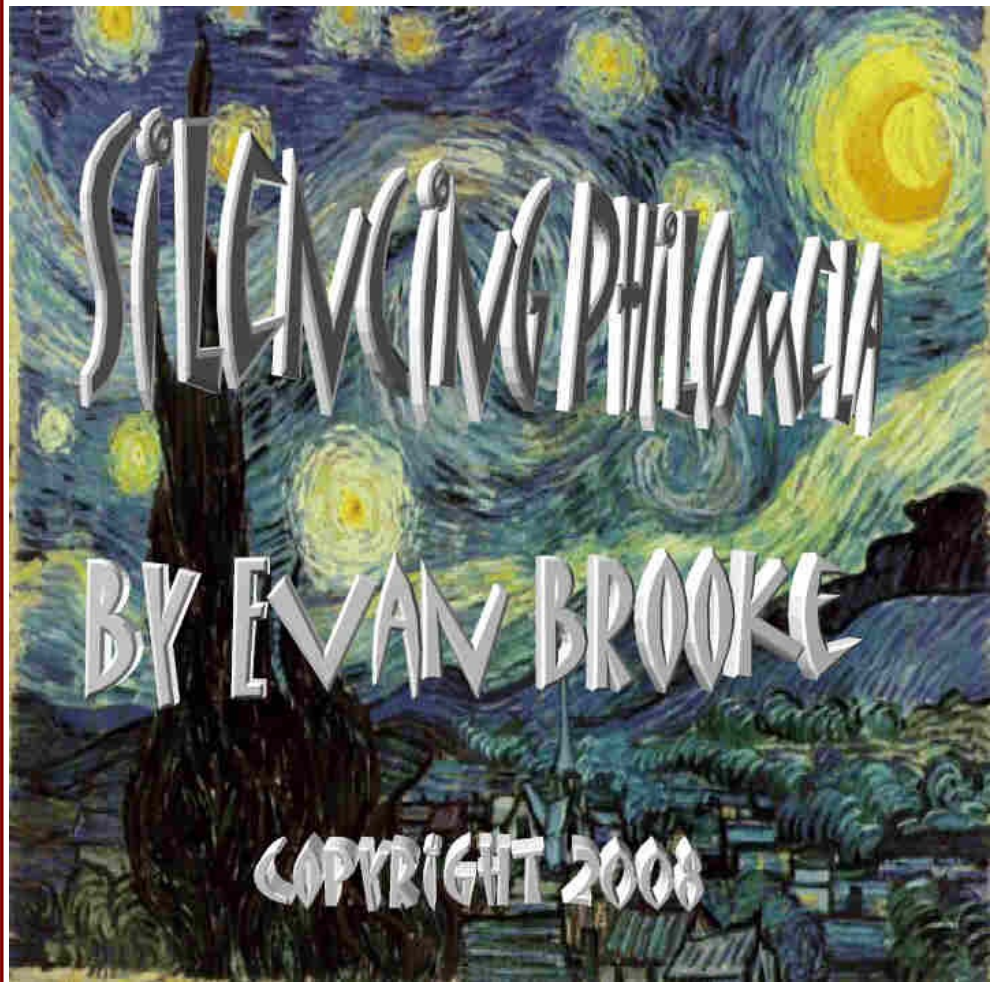
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*And the mute Silence hist along,
'Less Philomel will deign a song,
In her sweetest, saddest plight,
Smoothing the rugged brow of night
-Milton, "Il Penseroso"*

Old men make me cry. I don't know what it is, but I could see the happiest old man walking down the street, he might be whistling "What a Wonderful World," tapping a cane to his own rhythm, clicking his arthritic heels like an older Fred Astaire, and I'd still want to cry. He could even be mining his crotch or doting on a young girl's ass, and I'd still want to hug him, sit down with him, hear his story. They all have a story; sometimes it just takes some coaxing to extract the right one. Theirs are so unlike the stories my parents tell or that I could ever tell: there are joints and parlors, gals and gams, aprons and casseroles, storytelling radio shows, mom and pop shops with no INC. attached, bartenders named Tommy and Jimmy, athletes that don't cheat, war heroes for president, love letters, forbidden relationships. The potential for epic is long dead; Laurence, though, he had an epic.

A lot of old-timers come into the store. A community van picks them up at the Willow Spring Assisted Living Center and brings them here each afternoon so they can do their grocery shopping. When I'm not at the register I walk around and help them out: stuff like reading labels ("Are you sure there are no trans fats in there?"), reaching products on the higher shelves ("Why do they put the Metamucil on the top shelf, dear?"), listening to complaints about the effects of dairy on some unruly digestive systems ("Oh child, the bloating, the bloating, it's the bloating!"). And then the prices. Never a day goes by that I'm not bombarded with a diatribe on the pricing system, which leads into Social Security issues, Medicare debates, and long family sagas ("My son-in-law refuses to install handles next to the toilet in my daughter's guest bathroom. He won't do it! So when I visit, I'm forced to call for help to get off the john! Can you imagine, dear?").

Anyway, I have a warehouse of stories from the Willow Spring folks, but none are of the sit-

down-and-write-about genre. I do have one that fits the category, but Laurence isn't from Willow Spring. He is an employee. Was, I mean. He bagged groceries, wheeled them out to the parking lot and loaded them into customers' cars. The customer was usually some bitchy, bitter stay-at-home mom and the car was quite often a luxury SUV with customized plates. Laurence loved to report back to me on some of the plates. He said he had to repeat them out loud over and over again so that he could remember them. So when he'd be walking back inside, chanting...oh, let's say, "I'm a cutie, I'm a cutie, I'm a cutie," customers would either take the long way back to their cars, shaking their heads, wondering how Sudbury Farms could hire such a crazy; or they might stand there, arms around their children, and smile at Laurence..."Awww honey, he is a cutie, isn't he." Laurence laughed knowing that they thought he was senile. Some of our favorites were the aforementioned IMAQT, HE PAID, FTNSASY, and HZWEALZ.

Laurence only worked here for about nine months, but we got to know each other really well. He favored my checkout station, probably because I was the only one who wouldn't just pretend to listen to his stories. Like a sponge, I'd soak up every last detail. He could switch from being light and witty to commanding and Godlike in two words flat. His voice would put me in a trance; it was meant for radio. In fact, I told him he sounded a lot like Garrison Keillor. "Now how the heck do you know about Garrison Keillor?" Laurence asked, astonished.

"Well, Lar," I paused, waiting for his reaction.

"Don't call me that."

"Right. Sorry, Laurence. So when I'm not racking my brain over paper or plastic, I read and listen to the radio. It may surprise you to know, Laurence, that I, Lucy Gilbride, am a college graduate. I dabbled in History for a semester, got bored with the Classics after two semesters, and finally zeroed in on the study of lit-ra-ture," I told him in my best British accent.

"Well, la-de-da! How about that!" he chuckled.

After that we used to talk a lot about books and writers. He said he started reading a lot after his wife died, but left it at that. I was sure it was just a matter of time before he confided in me; he didn't seem to have much of a life outside of Sudbury Farms and our time together was a chance for him to share his stories. But I benefited too - I started looking forward to work and adjusted my schedule so that many of my shifts matched Laurence's.

I think Laurence used to be a big time boozier. He'd tell me these outrageous stories about the old days with his drinking buddies. It made me think of Fitzgerald's time in New York, except I don't think Laurence had a Zelda. My favorite story was when Laurence and his best friend Paul were sitting at Bemelman's bar in the Carlyle Hotel up on 76th and Madison back in 1951. Now Paul had been a bourbon guy (Maker's Mark, I think) and Laurence a devoted scotch hound; Dewars had been his thing. I told Laurence the thought of either of those drinks made me want to gag. Then I told him about the first time I had gotten drunk with my best friend Megan, how we had stolen into my parents' liquor cabinet and taken a shot of just about every liquor in it, which I was sure included various versions of scotch and bourbon. I remembered a bunch of fancy looking bottles with gold script on the labels. We had thought it would be smart to write our taste testing adventures down, a recipe if you will, so that we could remember how to re-concoct such an amazing level of intoxication. My parents had found that little gem of a recipe in the hand that was connected to my passed-out body when they had returned home from dinner. Laurence said he'd be furious if he had found his daughter like that, but then laughed. *What? Laurence had a daughter? Where the heck is she? Are they close? Why doesn't he talk about her?* I was surprised at my nagging desire to know about this woman, but Laurence didn't seem willing at that point to talk about her.

So they had been sitting at the Carlyle, a bit bored with the scene, when Tommy, the

bartender, whispered to Laurence that Joltin' Joe had entered the bar.

"Who the heck is Jolting Joe?" I asked

"DiMaggio, baby! It was Joe DiMaggio!" Laurence sounded like he was back in the Carlyle fifty years ago. His voice was youthful; absent was the raggedness, the labored enunciation.

"Miss, excuse me, Miss?" the customer squawked. "Ummm, hello? Miss! Miss! Your light is on, Miss! Do you work here or not?" she continued.

I didn't realize this chiseled woman in a pink yoga get-up was yelling at me until Laurence abruptly stopped in the middle of his story: *Boy were we in a tizzy when our newly retired hero sat right down next to us at the bar. I put away my scotch as he ordered a Vodka Martini and when I asked him if he needed us to move down to make room for anyone he smiled and said no, that he was dining alone. The next thing I know the three of us were...* "Oh, man. Hold that thought, Big L," I instructed as I turned around and addressed the piercing appeals behind me. A bright red lipstick stained coffee cup made its way down the conveyor belt just after the soymilk. All I could hear was "turn that damned thing off, that's my coffee." And all I could see were these pink, pointy nails swooping over the coffee as if an eagle's claws grabbing its young. Her clutch and overall manner softened a bit as she moved the cup toward her mouth. She sipped with such shocking gentility as if the coffee (latte she would probably insist) were still scalding. I wanted to tell her that her swollen lips looked like they had been burned by too many lattes.

"Sir, sir! Please put my soymilk in a separate bag. Plastic bag, sir. Put it in a plastic bag. My God!" she cackled.

Laurence would just smile at customers like that. His wrinkled hands had such difficulty separating those plastic bags. I would chitchat with the sighing, eye-rolling customer to distract her as Laurence would lick his long, arthritic finger and try to free just one bag from the bunch. To delay, I would often look up produce codes even though I knew them all by heart. Laurence moved slowly, but diligently, and never used all of his allotted breaks. You could always hear him coming, his shiny white sneakers squeaking against the linoleum. He shuffled around, sort of like Tim Conway's old man character did on the *Carol Burnett Show*. I think Laurence found relief in pushing the carts out to the parking lot. Sometimes I'd watch him walk out there, his six-foot frame leaning on the cart as if a walker. I warned him to be careful with the empty carts, that one might decide to flip up and hit him in the head. I have experience, I told him, it happened to me when I was eight. The fat lip was not worth the sundae I got afterwards. He just chuckled and said his brittle bones were too light to have much of an effect on the cart. I hated thinking about his fragility. I bought him some multivitamins (GNC's Mega Men for men over 50) and made him promise that he'd take them. He joked about being a mega man over 70, promised he'd take them, but assured me it was way too late for vitamins.

Laurence would always begin his stories with, "When I was your age." So sometimes I was fifteen, and sometimes I was, oh, twenty-five or so. He knew I was twenty-three, but his stories required range. I knew that when he really was around my age he had graduated from Williams College, was living in New York City, and working for an investment banking firm. It was strange, though, he never talked about his life after twenty-five. *But God, how did he end up here, in Needham, Massachusetts?* It must have been the drinking that got him into trouble. What really got me down was that I think he really needed the money. He always brought in his lunch and often wore the same clothes regardless of the temperature (baggy khakis that he seemed lost in and a dark blue, wool v-neck sweater). He drove an old, beat-up 1980 Cutlass Supreme that was as big as my parents' garage. I swear, if I didn't have so many student loans I would've given him my meager savings.

It took me about nine months to ask Laurence about his wife. We were sitting outside the store on a bench, finishing our lunches. He had the usual: cream cheese and jelly on white bread, a peeled apple (he was allergic to the skin), and a little baggy full of Cheez-Its. I couldn't bear the thought of him preparing his lunch each morning all alone in his one-

bedroom apartment. Well, I could bear it, but I didn't like thinking about it.

"Hey Laurence?" I asked.

"Yes, sweet Lucille?"

"How come you never tell me stories about your wife?"

"Caroline," he said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Her name was Caroline," he said, pausing for a few moments. "Come with me," he continued. As Laurence got up, he threw his frayed and crinkled brown bag (he reused them until the holes got too big) in the trashcan and motioned for me to follow him. I had to cut my stride in half in order to slow down to his pace. His car was parked in the back of the lot under a small tree. He parked there every day, even in winter, probably worried he would take space from customers. When we had snow, he'd wear these enormous galoshes, which turned out to be his old fly fishing waders. He would arrive to his shift at least a half hour early so that he had time to take off all of his gear. Suavely, like a fancy doorman, Laurence opened the passenger-side door, which, by the way, was the length of my entire car. I got in. I had never been in such an enormous vehicle before. I could lie comfortably across the front seat (notice the singular, there was just one front seat), no problem. It seemed like minutes before he arrived at his side of the car. I had put my seatbelt on, assuming we were going somewhere. I didn't care that we had only ten more minutes left of our lunch break. If he had told me we were driving down to New York City to see his old apartment in Gramercy Park and visit Chumley's, his favorite "joint," I would have gone.

Laurence looked at my fastened seatbelt and smiled. He leaned over - cautiously, as if a boy on a first date - and pressed the button that unbuckled my seatbelt. I breathed out, feeling foolish for thinking he might kiss me. "Just sit back, relax and listen," he said, sounding like a smooth jazz disc jockey. He put the key in the ignition and turned it just enough for the radio to go on. There was a tape sticking out of the tape deck (I was surprised that there even was one) and soon enough his wrinkly, bent index finger slowly pushed the tape in. I later learned Ray Charles was responsible for this song about Georgia. I looked over at Laurence and followed his lead: I slouched my back, tried to put my hands behind my head (not comfortable) but opted for my lap instead, and shut my eyes: Other arms reach out to me, other eyes smile tenderly, still in peaceful dreams I see, the road leads back to you. Oh, oh, Georgia, Georgia...no peace, no peace I find, just an old sweet song keeps Georgia on my mind. I didn't have to ask him to play it again. He had taped the song over and over again. And we just sat there and we listened. I peeked over at him a few times: he looked sad, but peaceful. At one point I looked closely to see if his chest was moving; there were a few sporadic breaths suggesting he was about to cry, but no tears fell. Grief or love or the combination of both was either killing this man or keeping him alive. *Who was this woman, and what about her or any person for that matter could evoke such a response? Did she break his heart? He hers? Was she alive? Was she pretty? Successful? Were they truly compatible?* I stopped the tape, interrupting Laurence's private elegy with, "Come on, Laurence, we've got to get back. Break's over."

Laurence was always so punctual. So when he didn't show up for work the day after our soul session in the car, I got nervous and called him at home. There was no answer and no answering machine to leave a message. I asked Kenny, the store manager, if I could take a break and go check on Laurence since he lived close by. Kenny shrugged and said, "It's no big deal, the guy doesn't do a Goddamn thing here anyway. A charity case, if you ask me. We need you in produce this morning - head on over there would ya?"

I walked toward the shiny apple section, but ran out the automatic doors as soon as Kenny turned his back. Laurence lived about a mile away in an apartment complex next to the Seven-Eleven. Needham Gardens consisted of several two-story, sandy-colored buildings that were laid out in Lego-like fashion, as if a child-builder had thrown them together in

haste. If window boxes constituted "gardens," then every tenant got his very own garden to tend to. Laurence's garden was a pumpkin patch at the moment - - I was happy to see that the hand-painted pumpkins (my own handiwork) I had given him as an early Halloween gift were being put to good use.

The doorbell was broken, so I knocked loudly. I counted to five, then knocked again and turned the knob on the door. It was open, so I entered and called out to Laurence as I walked through the living room. I was expecting the room to be trashed in made-for-TV-movie fashion: furniture flipped over, pictures strewn across the floor, vases broken in pieces; but everything appeared to be intact. I called out again, but no answer. There were a few frames of old photographs on a TV tray stand serving as a table next to the sole couch. One was of a little girl about four or five; the other was of a pretty woman probably in her twenties. Laurence was in neither of them. *Was this his Georgia?* I began to scrutinize the picture but then remembered why I was there and tore myself away. The light was on in the kitchen: I approached the doorway with a terror that briefly brought me back to those pigtail days of creeping towards my dark, monster-infested closet. I inched forward, squinting like I did as a child, and peered in the kitchen: *Relax, you fool, there are no monsters here, just ancient appliances.* My eyes quickly scanned the tiny room and eventually fell on the counter, where two pieces of white bread lay next to each other like abandoned graves. Only one was covered in jelly. A knife was left sticking in the cream cheese. Laurence must have gone off to tend to something else. I looked out the window and saw his Cutlass parked in the lot. I yelled for him. Nothing. I checked the rest of the first floor. Nothing. Upstairs. Nothing. I ran down to the basement. Nothing. Then I saw his khakied legs jutting out of the laundry room. He was wearing his usually noisy, white sneakers.

Laurence, my master storyteller, lost the ability to speak. And most of the right side of his body was paralyzed. His doctor said that with physical therapy he might regain some movement in his arm and hand, but he probably wouldn't walk without help again. Speech therapy was an option, but the doctor was less optimistic about that. Was this some terrible punishment for mistakes he had made? I couldn't imagine a worse sentence: depriving Laurence of his voice was like putting mittens on a pianist or clogs on a ballerina. It was like what Tereus did to Philomela, cutting out her tongue so she couldn't tell her tragic story. But she turned into a nightingale. And Laurence, into a silenced invalid.

Laurence was allowed visitors once he was removed from the ICU, but he refused to see anyone. I pleaded with the nurses, told them to tell Laurence that it was me, Lucy. When they said that he refused to see me, I broke down sobbing. *I need to see him, please, please, just let me see him.* The nurses were sympathetic, but told me to give it some time. So I waited.

Then Georgia showed up.

A week after Laurence's stroke, I arrived at the hospital with a bag of gifts: a four-hour video documentary on the Bronx Bombers, two boxes of Cheez-its, a bag of Oreos (he preferred Hydrox cookies, but after some research I discovered that brand doesn't exist anymore), a new copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and a "Get Well" card from the Sudbury Farms crew. I was determined to see Laurence that day regardless of anyone else's wishes. I knew that once he saw me he would welcome my visits. Maybe he'd try harder to start speaking again. I was headed to his room when I saw her walking down the bright hospital hallway. She looked like her mother from the photographs I had seen at Laurence's apartment: tall and thin; fair, lightly freckled skin; eyes the color of mint leaves. Threads of gray meandered through her pumpkin-colored hair. She looked kind.

"Lucy?" she asked.

"Yes, who are you?"

"I'm Georgia, my dad is...Laurence is my father. Shall we sit for a minute?" She gestured to the empty seats to our right. We sat down. An awkward silence crept around us.

"Georgia? You are Laurence's daughter? Caroline is your mother?"

"Was, yes." I was desperate to ask her about Caroline. I needed to know something, anything, but I couldn't.

"So Laurence told you about us? I mean, about me?"

"Yes, he loves his second family at the store."

"When can we see him?"

"I just left him," she said quietly.

"What do you mean you just left him?"

"I just sat with him for a while, but he's very weak. He doesn't look good, but the doctor says that."

"You mean he's allowing visitors? I've got to go see him," I said, getting up from the chair.

"Lucy, wait. He still doesn't want to see anyone."

"But he saw you."

"Give him some time."

"Can you please just tell him I'm here? I know he'll want to see me. I know he will, please," I said, tears mobilizing in the corners of my eyes. I refused to cry in front of her.

"I know this is hard for you, Lucy."

"It's hard for him."

"Yes, for all of us. My dad knows that you've been here and, in time, will appreciate your support and concern. He just doesn't want anyone to see him like this. He's very depressed. Why don't you leave me your number and I will call you as soon as his condition improves a little bit."

I hated her. It wasn't fair that Georgia could assert her role as daughter and reap the privileges of her position after all these years.

After Laurence was settled at Willow Spring, Georgia went back to Philadelphia. She suggested that I not go visit him; she said that's the way he wanted it; she said he'd be crushed - - especially since we used to make fun of all of the Willow Spring folks. I couldn't understand her decision to send her father to that place. She explained to me that the ultimate decision had been his, that he had agreed that it was the best place for him. Sure.

I respected Laurence's wishes and didn't go see him. I wrote to him though. I wrote stories about him and Paul and Caroline too. I made up the stories he never told, the stories he couldn't tell. After a while, he started writing legibly with his left hand and sent me short notes. He said he liked my stories: *L, Thanks for the latest edition of The Life of Laurence. Your stories are happier than mine. Maybe my mind will go soon too and I'll start to believe them. Keep writing, but not for me. You are talented. Yours, Big L.* Over time, his notes got shorter and he complained that his hand hurt. There was no final note; he just stopped writing. Georgia wrote to me though. Laurence had sent her copies of my stories and she

thanked me for them; she said fiction was better than a blank page.

After he died I got a package from Willow Spring. In it was the tape we had listened to in the car that day. There was a note from one of the nurses saying that Laurence had asked her to send it to me. I should have been grateful for the tape, but I wanted something else. I wanted a part in the story. I just wanted a part. But I never even got the story.

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Evan Brooke's fiction has previously been published in the *Chicago Quarterly Review*. She earned a Master of Arts degree in creative writing from Hollins University and a Bachelor's degree in English from Colgate University. A former advertising copywriter in New York and Boston, Brooke now lives outside of Philadelphia where she teaches high school English.