

Silent Night

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Rated: PG

Submitted: March 2017

Summary: Sometimes, silence can be deafening. Sometimes, peace can be heartbreaking. And sometimes, the quiet, though precious, can be less welcome than the chaos.

Story Size: 3,933 (22Kb as text)

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Silence.

The sound of it rings in my ears and deafens me. It wraps around me like a stifling, invisible cloak. It openly mocks me.

Tonight is Christmas Eve. The one night of the year where I've always felt like the world holds its breath in collective anticipation. The most peaceful night of the year, or so people say. I know it's all in my head, but ever since my childhood, I've felt like the silence runs a little deeper on this night, especially in the cold, dark hours when the carolers have long since retired back to their cozy homes, when the parties have died down and the goodnight kisses have been exchanged, and the fires in every hearth have burned down to nothing more than ash and maybe a stubborn, still smoldering ember or two. Even the gentle snowflakes, falling like wishes upon the frozen world, seem unnaturally loud in the still night.

Here, in this house, it's no different. The fire died out hours ago. The lights are all off, save for the merry multicolored lights on the Christmas tree. No sound can be heard — even the usual blaring car hours or urgent sirens of Metropolis are nowhere to be found.

I remember nights like this from my own childhood, when, like now, I was the only person awake in the house. Year after year, I'd lay on the couch in wait, hoping to see Santa sneaking in to leave his presents under the tree. Then, like now, the only company I would have would be the Christmas tree lights and maybe a stuffed animal to snuggle up with. Back then, I appreciated the silence that would descend once everyone was tucked in, snug in their own beds. It was such a relief, not to hear Mom and Dad fighting with each other. It was a much-needed break, to not have to step in and be a mother to Lucy.

As I got older, the silence on Christmas Eve got replaced. There were parties to attend with the few friends that I had. Or, if there *weren't*, someone was always up for a drink or two at the bar, to alleviate some of the loneliness. At least, there was at first. But as the years rolled on and we left school further and further behind, things changed. People got married. They had children. Christmas Eve became the loneliest night of the year. Even my parents couldn't be bothered half of the time. And when they *did* visit, it was never together. Not that that bothered me. Who wanted World War III on Christmas Eve? Not me.

Lucy was no better. She was usually too preoccupied with whoever her current boyfriend was to be able to spend the holiday with me. She still does, to be honest, though she's at least tried to make an effort to be here in the last couple of years. So, if I could, I would volunteer to work on that night. I think it might have been

the one night of the year where my co-workers actually appreciated me. After all, if I worked, it meant that some of the others could be home with their families. I didn't mind. At home or at work, I was still destined to be alone and bored. If I could help someone to be home with their kids, then I was happy to do so.

And then, Clark.

By the time I met him, I was completely jaded when it came to Christmas. Still, a part of me tried to have a normal, happy holiday, that first Christmas with him. I was Lois Lane! I was in charge of my own happiness, and I'd be damned if I didn't give one last, desperate attempt to reclaim the holiday as a happy time. It wasn't a big surprise, however, when no one made the effort to come to the dinner I'd planned on hosting.

No one, except for Clark.

He gave up his Christmas with his parents in Smallville to make sure that I wasn't left alone. He could have shown up empty-handed and I would have been happy. But, he's Clark, so of course he'd brought along a gift — a perfect star for my tree — which he'd said Superman had helped him obtain from the very heavens. It was the *most* meaningful gift I've ever received in all my life. Because it came straight from his heart, and because I understood what it meant. He'd listened to my sad story about the pathetic Christmases of my youth, and he was here now to fix all the hurt I had inside. That, no matter what our future held for our relationship, we were family by the bonds of our friendship.

Suddenly, even as we silently watched the snow drifting down in gentle flakes outside of my apartment window, the quiet was comfortable, healing, welcoming, instead of crushingly isolating. We didn't need to talk. My head on his shoulder, his head resting atop my own, standing there, heart to heart, we didn't need to fill the air with words. We simply basked in the budding love between us.

Now, here I sit, alone, in the house we bought together. Oh, I'm not *totally* alone. Clark is right upstairs, in our bed, sleeping. It was, unfortunately, a busy day for Superman. A riot in China, an earthquake in New Zealand, and over thirty suicides averted all over the globe kept him more than busy today. And that's not to mention his yearly appearance at the Coates Orphanage downtown to help Santa deliver donated gifts to the kids who will spend yet another Christmas waiting for a family of their own.

A family.

For five years now, we've tried for a family. We've done everything humanly possible to try and boost our chances of conceiving a child together, no matter how off-the-wall and unscientific it may have seemed. For five years, we've been rewarded with stark white negative pregnancy tests each month.

It's strange. There was once a time in my life when I was certain that I would never have children. How could I be a good mother? After all, it wasn't like I had a particularly good role model in my own mother. I was too afraid I would make the same mistakes she did, and become a terrible mother that my child didn't deserve. Oh, I was determined never to fall into alcoholism, but I was afraid of that nagging, critical, distant personality that her drinking had caused. And then, as I grew up and moved out to live on my own, I learned more about myself. I stopped worrying that I would be a terrible mother, even if I still wasn't exactly confident in my abilities to raise another human being. I worried only that a child would slow me down in my career, so I determined that I would win the Pulitzer first, and worry about a family later. But when Clark stepped into my life, and we fell in love and pledged ourselves to one another in marriage, my priorities changed.

Suddenly, I wanted nothing more than to give my husband the children I knew he hoped to one day have. The children I now so desperately couldn't wait to meet.

But the universe is cruel. The door to adoption was not only

slammed closed but permanently bolted shut to us. This coming just after we were told, in no uncertain terms, that a biological child was never meant to be in our future. Kryptonians and Earthlings, though we may look the same in every, single way, are too different, biologically, to bear children together. I don't think I'll ever forget that day, when Clark took me aside and said that Dr. Klein had the test results we'd been holding our breaths waiting for. "Brokenhearted" couldn't come close to describing how we felt. "Destroyed" was more like it, though even that word felt insufficient.

But the two of us never give in easily. So we rejected the reality of the situation and we tried anyway. We tried and tried, each month hopeful that we'd achieved the impossible. And each time our hearts were broken once more to find out that we'd failed, and that no tiny person would soon be the center of our universe. At some point — I'm still not sure when, exactly, it happened — we gave up on actively trying. But we didn't go back to actively preventing either, preferring an approach of "if it happens, it happens."

For the most part, we're learning to live with it, the fact that it will never be more than just the two of us. We have our moments still, when all the despair and heartache come rushing back to us. It's never something we see coming. It always hits us out of the blue, completely blindsiding us, taking us off guard, refusing to allow us to prepare for the blow. It can be anything. Seeing a couple out pushing their newborn in a stroller. An ad on television for diapers. The birth of Jimmy's son, Nicholas, just this past summer.

Christmas Eve.

The one night of the year that's full to bursting with childlike wonder. The one night when dreams come to life. The one night when any wish feels like it can come true.

But not in this house.

There should be one or more tiny people sneaking around this house, trying to catch a glimpse of Santa Claus. There should be nervous laughter as they pretend to be asleep on the couch. There should be a plate of cookies sitting on the coffee table with a tall glass of cold milk. There should be the blaring sounds of dozens of new toys in the morning, amid the joyful, excited shrieking of a toddler. I should be rocking a nursing infant to sleep while gently humming Christmas tunes in these still, late hours of the night.

But, instead, there is silence so deafening that I fear I might go crazy. In fact, I *do* feel like I'm slowly starting to lose my mind. The quiet is becoming oppressive and the walls feel like they are closing in on me. I feel like I might suffocate in the stillness that surrounds me. I have to stop, close my eyes, and breathe in deeply for nearly ten minutes before I finally succeed in slowly my hammering heart enough to beat back the claustrophobic panic that's building inside of me. I feel a tentative return to calmness as my burgeoning panic subsides like the ocean waves retreating from their high tide mark, back to the murky depths.

Still, it isn't enough to ward off the sadness in my soul. Noiseless tears pool in my eyes as I gaze at our tree, noting without needing to see where the ornaments are which denote our first Christmas as a married couple, the ones celebrating our first home together, that treasured star Clark so earnestly gave me. And my heart bleeds to know that there will never be ornaments for "Baby's First Christmas" hanging from those boughs of pine.

Another crack forms in my battered heart, as silently as the snow falling outside, and so stealthily that not even Superman can hear it.

Silence.

Blessed silence.

Music to my ears.

For what feels like the first time tonight, I sit down on the couch, a fresh, hot cup of tea cradled in my hands, warming me

before I can even take the first sip. My lower back pops as a hundred knots are released with the motion, bringing much-needed relief. It's the only sound that I can hear, and I smile to myself despite my weariness. I curl partway into a ball and soak in the light of the Christmas tree, as though the multicolored electric lights could give off an actual heat, instead of just their warm, merry glow.

I suppose I could light a fire if I wanted, but at this late hour, it doesn't seem worth the trouble. So I leave the hearth cold and dark, like the midnight air outside the house. It's been snowing on and off all day, and, last I checked, the frozen white flakes were falling again. It seems somehow poetic, for snow to be falling on Christmas Eve, just as it always does in movies and paintings and the songs we all know by heart.

It's quiet. So quiet. Metropolis seems so still, like a film placed on pause, awaiting only a simple word or touch to break the spell and lurch the world back into motion.

It's perfect.

It's *more than* perfect.

It's *magical*.

I don't use that word often — magical. Especially not in connection with the holidays. During my earliest years, sure, Christmas was something special, full of wonder and magic, giddy anticipation, and wild dreaming. Waiting for Santa to show up, falling asleep on the couch not long after my vigil began, being pleasantly surprised by the piles of gifts in the morning — all of it made it the most exciting night of the year. But as I grew older, Christmas was barely different from any normal day. Mom and Dad would fight. Dad would leave in a huff, sometimes not to return for days. Mom would drink herself into a stupor and pass out. Lucy would lock herself in her room and cry. Even if I hadn't been smart enough to figure out the Santa Claus lie, I would have lost my belief in him anyway.

Meeting Clark brought back a spark of that holiday magic. After all, our love has been one to rival any of the romances described in the old fairytales. He's my soulmate, plain and simple. Each day with him is like a dream come true. Even now, ten years after we exchanged vows and bound our two lives into one, I still lay awake some nights in awe that, of all the people on this Earth, he chose *me* to spend his life with. He's *Superman*. He could easily have any woman he wanted. And still he decided that he wanted *me*. A woman who was crass and rude to him in the beginning, and who actively tried to reject his friendship. A friendship he freely offered, no strings attached, never even asking for mine in return.

Still, as amazing as our life together has been, it was always lacking something. Children. The one thing we were assured would never be. Not through adoption. And certainly not through biology. Hearing those words, and seeing them play out in real life, month after month, year after year of seeing negative pregnancy tests only nailed the lid on the coffin of our hopes and dreams a little tighter each time.

But, sometimes, when you least expect it, miracles happen.

We can attest to that.

Our two miracles are asleep in their beds right now. Three-year-old Rebecca and two-month-old Julia. Living, breathing miracles that, against all odds, came into our lives. Half-Kryptonian, half-Earthling miracles. The thought of them is enough to make me cry with gratitude.

Neither of our girls were expected. We'd long since given up hope of having a child when I became sick enough to warrant a trip to the doctor. It was there that I first discovered that we were roughly seven months away from welcoming Rebecca into our family. When I told Clark that night, over dinner, and showed him the ultrasound...it was the first time I think I'd ever seen him cry. He actually *shook* with the joy he was feeling. I think he would have shouted to the world that he was going to be a father, if only

he could have. Instead, he thanked me, over and over and over again, for the child I was carrying within me.

With Julia, it was different. I just felt...off. I couldn't quite place my finger on what it was, but I felt like maybe, just maybe, I was pregnant again, even though Dr. Klein had firmly stuck to his assertion that our ability to conceive our daughter was just a fluke. I waited until Rebecca was asleep for the night before taking a home test. It turned positive almost immediately. Waiting for Clark to get home from his routine patrol over the city was torture as I imagined a hundred unique ways to tell him that we would soon be a family of four. And once I did, I saw those same happy tears glimmering in his eyes as he was rendered mute.

Silence.

It's a rare thing indeed, these days. There's always someone clamoring for my attention. There's always a howl of displeasure or a squeal of happiness. There's always a coo or a giggle to brighten my day. There's always a song to sing or a question that needs to be asked and answered. There is always a fight over whether or not the potty needs to be used or a shriek of panic over a missing toy. There's always a middle-of-the-night demand for food and a fresh diaper.

It makes the silence all the more precious.

But I love the noise much more than the quiet.

Even the temper tantrums are better than the suffocating quiet that used to rule this house. I treasure each laugh, each question, each demand for a snack. Because, in the back of my mind, I'm only too aware of how easily this could have never come to pass. I remember each time I cried myself to sleep, knowing that I could never give my husband a child, knowing that I would never be a mother.

It was always so much worse on the nights when Clark was away at some disaster or another. Because then the house was *truly* silent. I missed the sound of his soft breathing as he slept beside me. I longed for the sound of him pattering about in the kitchen, fixing us a midnight snack. The radio, the television — they filled the silence but not the void. I never blamed him. I never wished for him to give up being Superman. But it *was* hard to be alone some nights, not knowing when he was coming home again, not knowing if some lunatic would be wherever he was, with a chunk of Kryptonite. It was harder still, the nights when we could have otherwise made another fruitless — as it had seemed at the time — attempt to conceive a baby.

Resentment grew in my heart. Not toward Clark. *Never* toward him. But toward myself. I hated that, no matter what I did, I'd never be able to make him a father. I resented the fact that I couldn't assist him at the fires, hostage situations, shootings, and other disasters he regularly faced. In fact, there was more than one night when I sat up, waiting for him to come home, lamenting the fact that my days as Ultra Woman were over and done with.

Doubt grew along with the resentment. Had I done the right thing in marrying Clark, in light of the fact that I could never give him a son or daughter? Had I been wrong to keep him away from his people and the wife he'd been bound to at birth? After all, Zara was Kryptonian, just like Clark. Surely she could have fulfilled Clark's greatest wish — to have a family of his own flesh and blood. Oh, I knew in my heart that Clark had made his own choices. And he'd chosen to marry me. But I couldn't help those dark thoughts, the ones that crept into my mind in the middle of the night, keeping me from my dreams.

Dreams.

How often had I dreamt of a child? Boy or girl, it never mattered. In many, I never really knew the sex, just the fact that I was cradling our child in my arms. In some, I was very aware of whether I held a son or a daughter in my arms, with Clark looking proudly on at the child who shared his genetics. I always awoke from those dreams in despair, and wondered why the universe could be so cruel as to send me images of things that would never

be.

But now!

Now my heart is fuller that I ever could have imagined. The nights aren't lonely anymore. Even when Clark is away — like tonight, playing Santa for the kids at the Coates Orphanage, as he does every year — and the kids are asleep, I'm very aware of the fact that I'm not alone. It makes me feel...secure, in a way I've rarely felt before. It makes my heart so glad and I am more than content to be the only one awake in the house. It gives me such a profound sense of peace...and of purpose too. That's not to say that I'm defined by my children or that I lacked a purpose before they were born. I took great satisfaction in my job and drew my purpose from doing that job well, putting criminals behind bars and garnering a few awards in the process.

But this new sense of purpose, brought about by motherhood, is different. I'm no longer satisfied in just being a good reporter. Now, I feel content in watching all of the little things — things I never really thought about before. Watching my children learn how to laugh. Hearing their first coos. Witnessing their first steps. Seeing them correctly identify objects, shapes, colors. Being able to soothe their hurts or fears with nothing more than a kiss, a cuddle, a gentle word, and my presence. It makes every middle-of-the-night wake-up, or cold cup of coffee, or diaper change more than worthwhile. For me, it fills a void I had in my heart — the one my less than enviable childhood caused. Because I am everything my parents weren't. I'm there for my children, completely vested in them even when I've had a rough day at work or only three hours of sleep on which I need to function. I want my children to look back on their lives one day and regret nothing. I want their childhoods to be shining beacons of happy memories, especially on Christmas.

Christmas.

What is it about the holiday? What is it that touches our hearts so? What makes the silence of this night so comfortable and intimate, like it was tailor-made for each of us? What is it about this night that makes us believe in magic again, if only for this one night? Why do we, even as adults, unconsciously strain our ears in the quiet, as though we might, on the very edge of our hearing, capture the whispered notes of the angels' song or the tinkling of silver sleigh bells high above us in the air?

I'm not sure. And I'm not sure that I *want* to know. For me, it is enough, just to bask in the silence and magic of this night. Because, as I've learned, it's all too fleeting and fragile a thing. And I intend to enjoy every moment of it.

THE END