

ANONYMITY IS LIFE

By Sólá Saar

SILENT MONK

At the age of twelve, my sister Katrina bought two plane tickets to Thailand. She had a fascination with Buddhist sculptures, especially the headless ones, and having memorized the digits of my mother's credit card, resolved to see them in person. She went to the airport with Wart John, a palm-sized figurine tucked into her left pocket. In her other pocket was a tiny notebook.

Six months before, she had dropped a note on the dinner table that read, "I am taking a vow of silence," and stopped talking indefinitely. By scribbling messages in her notebook and using sign language and idiosyncratic gestures, she managed to communicate what she considered necessary. Her intentional silence was likely inspired by a documentary on hermetic monks my mother had recently watched. Katrina preferred the quietude of their world to the overstimulation of ours and was drawn to a society built on prayer and listening to oneself over one intent on drowning out God with noise.

In time, the nickname "Silent Monk" prevailed amongst our family, angering my sister, who felt we were mocking her mysterious, brave social experiment. Though we never learned her exact reasons for taking a vow of silence, for years she remained staunchly mute, conveying emotions to us she never could in words.

It was overcast the Sunday Katrina left for Thailand. She woke up at six in the morning, emptied the cash from our mom's wallet, and briskly crossed our front lawn. The rest of the family slept in, oblivious to her plans, as my sister walked a mile to the nearest bus stop.

She took a bus to Target and purchased a giant pink bouncy ball that rose to her waist. She took the giant pink bouncy ball on two more buses to LAX. It was at her side as she checked in for her flight to Bangkok, and it floated through plastic bins as she made her way through airport security.

An airline attendant later told us she noticed Katrina waiting alone at the gate, perched atop her bouncy ball.

"Where are your parents?" she asked.

Katrina smirked, took out her notebook and wrote, "eating pancakes" with a red marker.

Concerned, the attendant asked if Katrina was traveling alone.

She shook her head and pulled out Wart John.

"What's that?" the attendant asked.

She laughed, and scrawled "my boyfriend," in her notebook and showed the attendant.

Around noon, my mother received a call from the police.

When my mom and I got to the airport, we saw Katrina through the window of the lost-and-found office, sitting atop her giant pink bouncy ball, calmly staring at a blank wall, sublimely indifferent to the panic she'd caused.

ALBERT JOHN'S NEW SCHOOL CLOTHES

At first, I cynically suspected that Katrina's vow of silence was an extreme means of getting attention, of establishing dominance over the world around her, a protest in the form of an elongated silent treatment.

While she didn't talk to anyone, she barely interacted with me when we were alone, only acknowledging me with a reticent grunt when I entered the room. She had grown very contemptuous toward me over something. It seemed that everyone had grown contemptuous at me overnight.

It was around the time Katrina stopped speaking that I began writing. First, I kept journals, which morphed into short stories—pieces of a mirror that reflected something of my life. The world had begun to blur all around me. Nothing seemed under my control, and I had no way of crystallizing who I was without a record of what was happening, without forcing some kind of narrative on my life which had begun to fragment beyond recognition. My dad had left us for the last time, and my friends had all become different people. My mother Margot, when not in a drunken haze, spent all her time reading child psychology books, trying to figure out what was going on with Katrina.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say my artist mother disdained mainstream culture, especially the brand of mainstream culture that manifested in Redondo Beach, which she described as a "wine mom dystopia." She chose to keep us there because she had gotten the house in the divorce and because the public school system ranked well. My mother was half Black and half Irish, was raised by her artist mother famed for her involvement in the Black Power movement and shunned by her father's racist Midwestern family. It was an upbringing which made relating to my friends' nouveau riche mothers difficult even when drinking. She

hadn't made any friends since my parents had moved there 15 years ago, shortly before I was born. If having a snobby lush for a parent and a mute sister didn't differentiate us enough in our homogenous surfer suburb, my mother's annual ritual of displaying a human skull on the front porch on Halloween definitely did. This year, she told a complaining neighbor that the human skull was ethically donated to her high school's Biology program. She was an art teacher but had convinced Mr. Skiffle to give her the human skull of a man who died in the late 19th century after one of his students damaged it in Biology class.

"You shouldn't be so skittish about bones anyway. I hate to be the one to break this to you," she told a leathery blonde Real Estate agent with two young children proffering pillowcases full of candy, "But every single one of us, including you and you and you, are all going to die one day. And there's absolutely nothing you can do about it!"

"You might even end up on someone's front porch," she laughed.

She was drunkenly, manically inspired that night, and rationalized to me that it was fine, "natural," to deny Halloween offerings to children whose costumes or personalities or parents she disliked. "I don't understand what you see in your friend Elizabeth, she's such a dud. What does she even do?" she once remarked about a girl I hung out with once, aged eight at the time.

Trick-or-treaters she did approve of got apples, which they resented but accepted because they were afraid of her. Her drunken outburst caused both my classmates and their parents to spread rumors that she was a satanist.

"She's just a failed actress," I responded when a friend of mine brought this up to me. She had only done some acting in college, but she was certainly beautiful and hysterical enough for people to accept this excuse on face value.

With a mother like mine, the only possible form of rebellion was reactionary, to make myself aggressively basic, a performance of normativity which utilized punk logic but ultimately failed as an aesthetic experiment because it went over everyone's head. According to my mother, when Katrina stopped talking or started carrying around dolls everywhere, it was "performance art," but anything I did that was out of the ordinary was an "unfortunate phase." At thirteen, I bleached my dark hair— which disastrously ended up mostly on my pillow— and tried out for the cheerleading team. I'll never forget the gratification that came with horrifying my mother with the news of me becoming co-captain of my cheer squad. She really wanted to be open minded but couldn't hide her contempt.

"You were always saying you wanted me to be more active and do sports," I said, showing her my uniform.

"Cheerleading isn't a sport," my mother argued. "It's an appendage to football, a sport men invented because their egos are so fragile, they need bimbos to jump around and encourage them to give each other brain damage."

"Go, brain damage!" I said, fisting a pom-pom in the air.

"How did you even get on the squad? You're the least cheery person alive."

The audition had less to do with talent or peppiness than who you knew, so despite my sullen demeanor I ended up as a captain through knowing Seniors who were the judges. But I believe they ended up letting everyone who tried out on the squad after parents complained about favoritism. Halfway through the school year, I got sick of standing in the cold night air and realized I could no longer sublimate my grief into pretending to be normal.

My withdrawal from my circle of girlfriends did not follow the natural trajectory of slowly growing apart. When I returned to start my sophomore year of high school, I found

myself embroiled in strange rumors which ranged from me being a teenage escort to me giving hand jobs for designer clothes. Everyone thought I was a fourteen-year-old with a bunch of sugar daddies, my main one being our eccentric neighbor, Grant Dimarco, who many people in our town thought was a creep because of his poor posture and outdated mustache.

Mr. Dimarco was not my sugar daddy. He gave me his Criterion DVD collection and took me shopping—once— but it wasn't anything expensive, just your average suburban mallrat stores. And there were no hand jobs or sex acts involved. I got the dress for free; all I gave him was my time. I wasn't even alone with him. His stepdaughter, or his girlfriend's daughter, Veronica, went with us. She had just turned sixteen.

She picked me up on Saturday afternoon. Mr. Dimarco sat in the passenger seat. I remember Veronica insisting on driving as she had just gotten her license, and because she was such a reckless driver, speeding nearly 90 miles per hour to the mall. I was so relieved when she parked the car.

She got out of the driver's seat and revealed her outfit, a tank top with no bra underneath and cargo pants. The tank top was almost translucent, and it was hard not to stare at her nipples. I had never seen such naturally large breasts, which made the entire world around her fade into the distance like an out of focus photograph. She was also biracial, but while I looked like a white girl with curly hair, she had golden skin and blue eyes offset by jet black hair, the kind of racially ambiguous marketed as otherworldly, like a lingerie model.

Mr. Dimarco took us to five different stores that day. He acted as though he were genuinely interested in women's fashion, and he was probably at the time, more interested than me. Veronica headed straight for neon tank tops and flashy miniskirts. I imagined she went to

desert raves or 18 & under clubs in those outfits. I was a teenager too technically, but I may as well have been invisible next to her.

The first store we went to was called Tiffany's Lounge. It sold very cheap, trendy, slutty clothing, only in sizes extra small and small, and was owned by fascists overseas. Once, I was walking by the store with my mom and grandma, who were disgusted by my interest in the style of clothing. My mom told me I had to wait until I was 15 to shop there, but said she hoped I would grow out of liking that look. Then my grandma said if I dressed like those mannequins, people would think I was a "twinkie." I didn't know what a "twinkie" was, but I assumed it was an old-fashioned word for an idiot.

Mr. Dimarco really stood out in this store. Not only was he an old man in a store for teenage girls, but he really didn't look related to Veronica or me. He was also nerdy, with a stuttering, nasally voice. Still, nobody asked us any questions throughout the entire day, and we offered no explanations.

Veronica grabbed a menagerie of backless metallic halter tops and motioned me into a dressing room. Mr. Dimarco waited outside like a whipped husband. In the dressing room, Veronica nonchalantly ripped off her tank top. Her breasts were soft and round, and I felt envious and slightly aroused. I plucked my dress off the hanger and slipped it on over my shirt and jeans.

I turned back to Veronica. She had tossed a couple of rejected items on the floor and put on a baby blue shirt that said "Porn Star" in rainbow graffiti letters.

She slid the fitting room curtain open and showed Mr. Dimarco the shirt.

"What do you think, Granty?" she asked.

"'Porn Star'?" Mr. Dimarco asked, staring incredulously at the words on her chest.

“Yeah, it says, ‘Porn Star.’ So?”

He groaned. “What do you think, Vera?”

I thought that sexualizing her body even further was unnecessary, considering her cleavage already attracted so much male attention. I looked down at my sundress and felt like a prude.

“Uh, it’s a joke,” I said.

“Yeah,” Veronica agreed. “Duh.”

“‘Porn star’ is a joke?” he asked. “I don’t get it.”

Veronica glanced at me, and we giggled in unison. I had seen other teenage girls do this many times, knowing that this laughter erupted out of callowness and confusion, and no tangible joke lurked underneath, other than the awkwardness of being unsure of who we were or what we were doing, in general but especially in that moment with Mr. Dimarco. Usually on the outside of this phenomenon, being with Veronica, who wasn’t threatened by the pressure and competition of being a girl exactly my age, allowed me to mimic this spontaneous, senseless conjoined laughter without feeling self-conscious. It was an empty, almost sadistic thing girls did, but I still felt a sense of elation in performing it.

“Can I get it?” she asked.

“Sure. Try on another one.”

He said nothing about my dress, and I went back into the fitting room and abandoned it on the floor. Veronica had pulled out at least twenty items, mostly tops she rejected even before pulling them over her big boobs, which she complained wouldn’t fit in any of the size smalls.

“Do you have anything else to try on?” she asked me.

“Oh, no. I’m going to wait outside,” I said, realizing I’d just been standing there leering at her as she tried on clothes. I walked outside and sat down next to Mr. Dimarco on the bench. There was nothing more boring to me than watching someone trying on clothes, but the elated look that crept over Mr. Dimarco’s face every time Veronica walked out of the fitting room, whether he liked what she was wearing or not, made me wonder if I lacked something, either in what I saw in Veronica or what I saw in myself.

She came out a few minutes later in a white V-neck T-shirt.

“This shirt does nothing for you,” Mr. Dimarco said flatly.

She rolled her eyes and walked back in the room.

Veronica racked up eight shirts, two miniskirts, a pair of jeans, and some shoes that day. I got a plaid dress I wasn’t sure “did anything for me.”

While walking to the parking lot, Mr. Dimarco mentioned that his sister got killed in a hit-and-run accident when she was eighteen.

“That’s so sad, Granty,” Veronica said.

“There wasn’t anything I could have done to prevent it!” he said angrily, as though someone had accused him of killing her.

“Can we go to the new ice cream shop?” I asked.

“I can’t have ice cream. I’m lactose intolerant,” he said. He took out a \$20 bill.

“You go, and meet us back at the car,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the warm bill in my hand.

At the buffet-style ice cream shop, I got two scoops of cookie dough ice cream sprinkled with powdered sugar and gummy bears in a bowl made from sugar cones. It was cloying, and I felt nauseous after a couple of bites.

I wandered back to the parking lot, which had grown dark, trying to remember where Veronica had parked her car. I finally found the row with her car. Mr. Dimarco was in the passenger's seat with his head back. I thought I might have taken too long, and he had fallen asleep waiting for me. I started running back to the car. He must have heard me, because his head jerked up and he started the car when he saw me approaching. I saw Veronica in the passenger's seat fumbling with some hand sanitizer. With some hesitation, I entered the car.

"Hey," I said. "Sorry I took so long."

"Hi, Vera!" Veronica beamed, as though we were suddenly best friends. "Can I have a bite of your ice cream?"

"Sure," I said. I handed it to her. I can't quite describe how I felt when I got back in the car, but something seemed off between them, and there was a strange smell. My dwindling appetite vanished.

"You can have the rest," I told Veronica. She threw the plastic spoon out of the car window and licked the ice cream straight out of the bowl, fitting her tongue into all the crevices.

When I showed my mom the dress and told her how I got it, a panicked look crept over her face.

She said, "Old men who aren't related to you don't buy you anything without expecting something in return. And sometimes you can't even trust the ones that *are* related to you."

"I'm not returning the dress," I said, licking the collar. "It's mine!"

"Ew, Vera. Keep the dress. But you are not to hang out with Mr. Dimarco ever again."

"I wasn't alone. Veronica was there."

"She's another one. That girl is a bad influence."

“What do you mean? She’s cool.”

“Why don’t you hang out with people your own age?” she asked.

I hadn’t told my mother my girlfriends hadn’t contacted me all summer and I had been growing away from girls my age who had become increasingly catty and cliquy since entering high school.

That Monday I returned to school, this girl in my grade, Quinn, told me he tried to take her shopping just the weekend before, but she had refused. I felt a little betrayed. I didn’t like him or anything, but now that I knew I was just one of many objects of his teenage-daughter fetish, and not even his first choice, I realized that not only had I done something inappropriate, but unexceptional. In his mind, I was an interchangeable object, one of who knows how many. I didn’t regret obtaining my dress, but when I imagined him serially playing that role with multiple girls, each time getting his father-figure fix, I saw not the act but his compulsion as calculating and pathological, like a serial killer who only wanted to murder pale brunettes who had their hair parted down the middle.

Quinn was a redhead, and Veronica had dark brown hair, but our hair color wasn’t the point of his obsession. Mr. Dimarco was a breast man. I could tell this even at fourteen. Quinn didn’t flaunt them as blatantly as Veronica, but she had other ways of drawing attention to her chest, intentionally or otherwise, by wearing trendy shirts that said “FOXY” or “LUSCIOUS” or “10% Angel 90% Devil,” always under a gold cross necklace, which she twirled in her fingers intermittently. She sent out all these mixed signals about her sexuality, which despite her incongruous facial features, heightened her mystique.

Quinn's parents were so overprotective that they wouldn't even let her have sleepovers, so it didn't surprise me that she turned down Mr. Dimarco's offer. She was a very sheltered and incurious person.

"I just didn't understand why a man who isn't my dad would need to take me shopping," Quinn said innocently, and with a pause and scoffing glance cast a thin coat of shame over my plaid dress.

I wasn't too bothered by what other girls said about me, but I did feel a little guilty when Katrina somehow found out about Mr. Dimarco.

Katrina knew nothing about boys but was an expert in eavesdropping. If my mother were on the phone, and Katrina were in the other room, she could understand every word because of her sensitive ears.

Before her vow of silence, she began incessantly texting and writing out notes on the screen of her phone, a mode of communication she would eventually solely use. My mother and I got hundreds of indecipherable texts on a daily basis, which I mostly ignored.

She started sending me all these texts around lunchtime about a boy named Albert John.

12:35: on may 16, Albert John, a white male human who stood 5'10" tall and was born on june 14, 1992, was a freshman in high school and wore faded, boxy jeans from maybe Ross or something, a grey AC/DC t-shirt, white and blue New Balance shoes and brown baseball cap, ate Chick-fil-a sandwich for lunch.

12:40: on may 17, Albert John wore a Hanes white t-shirt with a food stain that was maybe soup or pizza we do not know, the same or similar faded, boxy jeans, and a black-and-white hoodie.

12:41: i think Albert John's mother should buy him clothes that fit right.

12:50: maybe I will buy Albert John some better choices.

2:53: should I buy Albert John Donne a new outfit and then he will love me?

5:30: dear Albert John Donne—

9:30 Glad you made a friend!

Considering Katrina often talked about Disney Characters, imaginary friends, and students from school as if they were all equally real, living in the same dimension as the rest of us, I assumed Albert John was likely fictitious.

Albert John became real when he showed up with his mother at our house a couple of weeks after I got those texts, and I vaguely recognized him from school.

Albert John's mother and Albert John stood in the doorway holding a pile of clothes and a receipt from Target. It read:

1 light blue button-up shirt, \$19.99

1 pair eggshell Dockers pants, \$39.99

3-pack white Hanes undershirts, \$9.99

1 pair boxer shorts, \$5.99

1 polka-dot bow tie, \$9.99

Albert John's mother seemed mostly unsure of why these clothes had been delivered to her house, but politely tried to hand them to my mother, who stared at her with confusion. Albert John intervened.

"I'm sorry. I can't accept Katrina's outfit. I already have a girlfriend. I like her as a friend but not in that way," he said.

"Oh, *you're* Albert John," my mother said.

"Yeah. The clothes aren't even my style," he added. His mother smiled politely and handed my mother the pile of clothes.

"Please tell Katrina to stop sending me things."

After they left, my mom placed the outfit on the kitchen counter.

"Do you know a boy named Albert John?" she asked me.

"I think he's in her grade," I said.

"Katrina sent him an outfit. Rather preppy," she paused, inspecting the bowtie. "I couldn't tell if he was *special* or not."

I nodded. At the time, the classes Katrina was placed into were labeled "Special Education" and this was my mother's way of asking if he were neurotypical.

Katrina came into the kitchen and noticed the pile of clothes on the counter. She rushed toward my mother with her phone. My mom put on her glasses and read: "Did the postman make a mistake?"

My mother paused. She was usually blunt, fearing ambiguous language would only lead to more unanswerable “whys” and “how comes.”

“Albert John can’t accept your outfit. He already has a girlfriend.”

“Albert John doesn’t love me?”

“I don’t think so, dear. Sorry.”

With this rejection, Katrina retreated further into her own universe. If she couldn’t find a real boy to return her affections, she’d settle for online avatars.

She began a pattern of torturing her SIMS characters on a regular, almost ritualistic basis. Building communities, she’d make sure they reached the zenith of nuclear familial success, but once her characters appeared stable, she’d set fire to their houses. Around 4 p.m. every day, I’d hear her crying, clicking to make the flames engulf her SIMs homes. Then she’d complain to my mother, weeping about her dead digital families, until finally my mother deleted the game from the family computer.

After that, she transitioned to conjuring people out of thin air, and soon her network of imaginary characters came to fill her entire existence. She invented her own husbands and lovers, objects of her controlling affection to replace Albert John. Taking the forms of imaginary overweight men, they met fates just as tragic as those of her SIMS characters. I got email updates daily.

“my lover with blonde hair and blue eyes who is obese named Conrad Driller who stood 5 ft. 7 inches tall died of heart attack on May 20 at 3:30 pm in his apartment in Salem, Washington at age 19 and suddenly a male roommate found a dead body.”

“now my lover is an overweight wise man with white hair, double chin, light brown eyes, red cap, white and gold priest's robe,” she wrote me a few days later.

Eventually, growing bored with humans, she chose to date anthropomorphic creatures from fairy tales and Disney movies. Sometimes they had chronic diseases.

“Noco is an anthropomorphic stag deer with a tan loincloth, human-like fingers and toes, a green feather hoop earring, green face mark, medium antlers, and brown eyes. Noco is engaged to me.”

Most of her lovers met tragic deaths, by falling off cliffs, getting cancer, or suffering freak accidents. After Noco, a succession of deceased boyfriends followed.

RIP Larry Goodwill, an anthropomorphic pink pig who had a droopy-ish voice, a tuxedo and human-like fingers who stood 6 ft. 5 inches tall, died May 29.

RIP Kenneth Garbel, a male red kangaroo who stood 6 ft. tall loved me a few years ago. One day they suddenly took Kenneth the dead kangaroo and then cut Kenneth in a meat factory in Bakersfield, CA into pieces and sent him to certain restaurants all over the United States.

RIP Oalu, an anthropomorphic water vole who stood 4 ft. 7 inches tall with a thick mustache, brown eyes and beige loincloth, died May 30.

Unfortunately, none of her fictitious love interests ever made her forget about Albert John. A couple months after his mother returned Katrina’s outfit, he came back to our door asking for Katrina. Katrina ran to the backyard weeping. From the kitchen window, I watched my mom answer the door and greet Albert John.

“She’s taken a vow of silence,” my mother told him.

“What?”

“She’s become very religious. It’s a very serious social experiment. You probably wouldn’t understand. It’s not like your football games.”

He frowned. "I really need to talk to her."

"I'll relay the message to her."

"Can you tell her to stop sending me love letters and flowers? My girlfriend is jealous."

"Sure," my mother said, slamming the door in his face.

My mom came into the kitchen as I was making coffee. She looked out the window as Albert John walked away, narrowed her eyes at him and said, "I don't know where he gets off rejecting her. He's nothing special."