

A Quiet Day

Mary A Mayo

Times have changed to say the least, and I say that not as some bone weary senior or as though I've been greatly disenfranchised, but with time comes attitude shifts, a new generation of language and technologies. It is including those changes that I find myself walking down the hilly streets of Edinburgh, the architecture medieval to ultra-modern my companions in weather that familiar mixture of sun and chilly breeze. However I see the driverless cars, the absence of plastic bottles and the lights of Edinburgh - while they light up the early morning street lamps save their energy in a bluish-purple shade over cobbled streets.

But my generation, like any, is seeing out a change thoroughly irreparable. It hadn't felt invasive at the time, though many a speculative argument was had over the topic, but its enforcing was gradual and eventually so commonplace many ceased to notice - or simply shrugged off what they couldn't change. Don't ask me *how* they do it, who *they* are and or how such a movement came to pass as though reasonable. But these things do happen. "Muting" – it stands for something I could never bother to recall, but the name fits the function.

It started online, AI advanced so well any hate speech was removed immediately and soon after it was phone calls, personal emails, then in the home and you. Should someone speak 'what cannot be said anymore' sure enough they are muted, unable to speak and that is the punishment. It isn't alone in this individualistic approach to reprimand, but certainly the most obtrusive.

Reaching the block of offices still lost in contemplation, beyond the odd smile no one is greeted well before continuing the unpleasant daydream at my desk. I can't say exactly why it unnerves me as it does, muted sentiments things I would never say, at least I would hope not, but afraid of discipline I can't even expose myself as possibly ignorant, perhaps to learn better.

Distracted throughout the morning a sudden commotion jarred me awake, the origin a flurry of a coworker leaving the room and the ripple of whispers and chatter in her wake. No one followed but me, some even stifling laughs, and upon entering the restroom I faced her teary eyes - and her silence. After calming with kind company she pulled out her phone and typed up what occurred, avoiding her text correct's ability to detect her 'offence'. My stomach twisted as I read the words 'Olivia screwed me over again. She pretended I told her I didn't want training anymore and gave it to Marcus. I called her a *privileged - white - female dog.*'

It didn't take a genius to know she never used the term 'female dog', but still I was confused "was that all you said?" I asked in disbelief and received a nod before her beautiful face scrunched up again in hurt. She'd been muted for calling out the truth of her chirpy opportunity-discriminatory racist boss. Skin colour had nothing to do with it, I'd be muted for the same words, but an angry pit in my stomach burned at seeing her reprimanded.

By lunch I was irate, fire steadily fanned and any chitchat was clipped. I want to vent, to ask who that was protecting? How difficult it was to have a grey area in censoring when handing out punishments? It didn't help listening to one of the supervisors not so subtly bragging about his home life, although the more he spoke the more I grit my teeth, euphemistically tiptoeing around his uneven relationship, how great he had it because of his spouse's unfair position to him.

In my mind an angry voice repeated for him to just say she 'belongs in the kitchen' or 'women are better at cleaning' and 'men are the better providers' - *just say it!* Tell me who you really are so I

know to avoid you. The threat of muting like a personality crutch to those sporting unflattering true colours. But he never did show the *real* him and I found no comfort in knowing he couldn't.

Home, finally, and I'm unable to watch television or unwind - blankly sitting still in my coat with a lazy cat by my side. An hour passed before clarity brought curiosity, nothing better than a teen testing boundaries because they hadn't before, and out loud to no one but my cat I call Olivia a 'privileged white *female dog*'.

And nothing.

Still hearing my voice I tried again. I tried more comments, horrible things that felt diseased and rotten upon the tongue. Yet I could speak. Insincerity was no factor as comedians were often muted and lack of audience a known irrelevance to the offence too. But not for me.

A pang of worry had me searching online in seconds to find any answer for the phenomenon. Quickly enough a page informed of some individuals unregulated due to error and to report the fault to your local council. Leaving the government sites I scrolled through forums, skimming until finding the discussion I needed to read.

It was suggested to report the fault but not legally bound, the council could threaten court action to scare without a leg to stand on the council would drop the case. Or as one commenter wrote 'very much the equivalent to what a couch surfer is to council tax.'

The tension faded, shrugging my coat from my shoulders I sink into cushions relaxed for the first time today, the pressure in my chest alleviated and the fire while still there burned calmly. As though deprived of air and finally able to breathe I knew I wouldn't be reporting my 'fault', not so I could say anything another couldn't, not to say something venomous - but to have the choice. Too long deprived of an action, the choice to not say words. To feel the much missed freedom of self restraint.