

# **The Irony of Silence**

**by Kristin Murdock**

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# The Irony of Silence

## **Laura**

A library is more than a home for books. For some it is a refuge.

This thought, not so random, passed through Laura's mind as she swept the returned books from their dumping space and into her arms. Spreading them out on the wooden desk, she reached out for the black plastic scanner with its infra-red eye. Charged with opening the Mulga Gardens Library doors first thing in the morning, and locking them at night, the first and last hour of each day was a welcome, quiet repose.

Bookend hours in a way; marking each side of six work hours when Bruce Pecker was librarian in charge and felt it his duty to educate his younger workmate with such condescending politeness that Laura was tempted to swipe the dark rimmed glasses from his face. But she wasn't into violence. Quite the opposite.

These precious hours were a buffer from the dramas of home where Mike compressed and interrupted her life in a different and harsher way than Bruce ever could.

A hardcover slipped from her grip, clipping her forearm before landing open on the carpet, pages splayed. In this early blissful hour, there was no need to check if anyone spotted her slight, painful wince. Laura pulled down her sensible blouse sleeve to hide the bruise. Too much pepper in the casserole last night. Her fault entirely.

The daily escape to this building of a thousand stories never lost its appeal. It was quiet – not silent as demanded in libraries of the past but peaceful all the same. Laura amused herself with an internal guessing game, predicting the favoured genre of new customers. She rolled this silly game around her mind like a kid with a boiled lolly that never lost its flavour.

The regulars were predictable by now; Nola Clancy, a university professor who enjoyed the neat and happy endings of cheap romance novels; ex-army rifleman, John Campbell, who soaked up every biography; family history stalwart Clancy Stern, who was hot on the non-fiction section. But there was one regular she could never put a finger on. Indi Samson. Laura only knew this woman's name by checking her library card.

How long ago now? Six or eight weeks? Indi Samson was there after Laura had gotten out of hospital with that broken rib. Slipped on the mossy path, she explained to Bruce. Her fault entirely.

Anyway, in that sacred first hour, holding her side as she came out of the tiny work kitchen with a steaming green tea, Laura had laid eyes on her. Around 40, she was dressed in a careless boho style that looked thrown together and fashionable all at the same time. To be honest, Laura was initially drawn by her style. Laura was required to look like a staid librarian – not that work demanded that but Mike did. In contrast, if she had to sum up Indi Samson's style in one word, it would be quite simple. Free.

From that day on, Indi was the first customer of every morning, already browsing the shelves when Laura exited the kitchen with her morning cup of tea. Annoyed at first by this intrusion to her hour of peace, Laura soon realised she wasn't about to be bothered with unrequested book reviews or pleas of recommendation of a certain genre.

Firstly, because this boho woman didn't have a certain genre, she had many. From science fiction to romance, horror to non-fiction – she borrowed them all.

Secondly, in three months Indi Samson had never uttered a single word.

**Indi**

Mulga Gardens wasn't the first library Indi had spent so much time in. When her fingers skimmed the books, she felt familiar safety in the countless endings of everyday stories.

Books offered possibilities.

Originally Indi had doubted if this particular building was a suitable place for her. In the first few days, a middle-aged man with balding hair and hooded eyes had stood behind the desk. She quickly recognised his suspicion, glancing up occasionally as though she was about to thrust a leather-bound first edition into her handbag. Not that this library had first editions or that she had a handbag – well not really, rather a loose string thing where she carefully stacked her daily borrowings.

Then Laura had appeared, ordained with a glossy, plastic name-tag which was decorated with children's stickers and affixed to her blouse with horizontal perfection. Indi was immediately aware of the carefully trained, vacant gaze and her too tight grip on the steaming beverage – every day in the same cup, at the same time. Such predictability worked in Indi's favour.

Once, with her back to the borrowing desk, one hand sliding along the line of books, Indi studied the librarian's reflection in the glass door. Laura bent slightly to the left and massaged

her ribs more than once, followed by a slow exhalation of breath. When Indi borrowed books, the librarian's fingers lingered on the covers as if bidding them farewell. But the books were always back safely the next day. Once, early on, Laura had tried to strike up conversation.

'Gosh you read a lot of books,' she had said brightly. Indi had met her eyes briefly, but not replied. The next day Laura held up a book and said, 'I've heard this was a good one.'

With no reply but noting a slight smile forthcoming, Laura had extended herself to open-ended questions. Indi remembered them from school, ones which required more than a yes or no answer. Internally, she gave Laura points for trying but offered nothing as a reward.

She wasn't trying to be rude. Indi wasn't trying to be anything but invisible. But as a regular morning and afternoon visitor to the library she knew she had become recognisable. Ideally though, becoming a regular also makes you invisible, part of the furniture. Like the knitting club on Wednesday afternoons, or the family history group who coveted all the computers on Tuesday mornings.

Indi had always found a comforting regularity in libraries – books coming in, placed on the shelves, resting and then going out again. At Mulga Gardens Library, she discovered they had

regular library displays (overseen by arbitrary Bruce, she noticed) changing dependent on the time of year, or based around a recently released novel or visiting author. Indi sensed Laura found comfort in this reliable monotony. She recognised that sameness about her. But over time, though still overtly interested in Indi's choice of books, Laura had eventually given up trying to make conversation.

As the weeks passed, even the piercing eyes of Bruce ignored Indi. Probably just as well he was not there to notice her predictable movements at the end of the day. As a bonus, Laura was always preoccupied, her brow furrowing and eyes clouding over as the clock marched toward five. Once, early on, Laura noticed at the last minute that Indi was still walking amongst the shelves. She hustled Indi out, the librarian's mind already in a far more precarious place as she pressed the alarm code and locked the door. And never did Laura notice that at precisely 4.55 every day, just before closing, Indi was always by the audio book shelf, nestled beneath the northern window.

### **Laura**

Bruce has noticed her. In those blissful silent hours, peace before and after chaos, Laura's boss had made an unwanted and unnecessary appearance.

'Who's that?' he demanded. A complete catalogue of regular visitors was imprinted on his brain. And yet he didn't notice the obvious – the wince of pain as Laura leant over, the fading green bruises that were quickly replaced with new ones. Laura shrugged. For some reason she chose to protect this mysterious visitor, though from what she wasn't sure.

Laura never mentioned Indi's complete silence. The mysterious boho woman never approached the desk when Bruce was there and Laura knew why. She recognised familiar flickering eyes, hastily avoiding contact, dancing a frantic tango.

But the books! Indi borrowed at least five a day, returned promptly next morning. Like Laura, her mysterious customer always lingered longer at day's end, fingering through the audio books, even though there was never one in her borrowing pile. Obviously not deaf then, but maybe mute? No word was uttered from her lips. Ever.

It didn't matter really. Laura was content with her mysterious customer's cautious smile and didn't bother with offering superfluous questions anymore. She remained close mouthed just as Indi did, liking the fact that it was no business of others what dangers flirted at the edge of people's lives.

Couldn't help but watch her though, this kindred spirit. Indi drifted along the shelves of fiction, non-fiction, magazines, YA,

even the ancient microfiche containers. Not many libraries had microfiche anymore and fewer people even knew what they were – ancient, comparatively labour-intensive machines that required seeking out a flimsy black negative that held a thousand files and had to be inserted into a double glass plate – requiring a thousand more finger flicks than the internet.

After a few weeks, Laura found herself seeking out the flowing skirt and purple hemp scarf of her visitor. Always the same – brown hair falling across one eye, a handy screen to society. Laura also knew what it was to want to hide from the world. She tried to unravel Indi's mystery by checking her borrowings but no go. Classics sometimes, self-help, the odd biography and satisfying crime of retribution but nothing that spelled out and defined this mysterious person and, although she always finished her visit by the audio books, there was never a plastic covered cd in the pile. And so every afternoon, just before closing, Laura scanned Indi's books, always trying to locate a pattern in her reading while also attempting to ignore the biting pain that chewed at her ribs.

### **Indi**

Indi sensed why Laura hadn't tried too hard to figure her out. The librarian was enjoying her mysterious appearance as a distraction from reality and Indi understood entirely. Much like

the books Indi selected: random – any subject, any author, any genre – irrelevant but a safety net all the same. But while Indi didn't speak, she constantly listened. Bruce, the little arse, spoke with flippant, dismissive throwaway lines and Laura, to her credit, ignored all of them.

And when face to face, with expressions carefully vacant, Laura never spoke to Indi directly, rather to the desk, chair, telephone or carpet. Laura's comments to these inanimate objects cryptically told Indi that life at work was far better than that at home and she wasn't about to sabotage that by breaking the silence. Even yesterday, when Laura had announced the upcoming pearling industry display, featuring a unique smoky pearl from Western Australia as the centrepiece, Indi said nothing.

As for the daily load of books, Indi jammed them into her string bag every night and then emptied them onto the desk every morning where Laura's immaculate nails swept them to the scanner. Indi skimmed most of them overnight – some good, some average. There was a world of stories in the library: in every corner; mags, novels, DVDs, even microfiche. You never knew what you might find out.

Indi's favourite time was at night, the darkness cloaked the day's exposure in a calming dark sanctuary. Not that these days her nights were totally dark. Dull maybe, but the security lights

glowed through Indi's fitful sleep. And then there were the cushions: an assortment of kid's characters and more mature greens and blues. This comfort of routine had slowed her racing thoughts.

Indi noticed how the librarian's brow wrinkled whenever she took in the boho outfit, as though it symbolised freedom. And this breezy clothing did, in a way. In actual fact Indi had purchased her clothes at the local Salvos and was quite surprised that they had come across as retro fashionable – go figure. And already Indi had Laura's number and could interpret her thoughts. This transparency wasn't Laura's fault of course; she just wasn't familiar with a life of dodge and adaptation. Or so Indi assumed at first.

In Indi's experience, it was worse when abuse came as a surprise not an expectation. But, as usual, she said nothing. And while it might seem unusual to be in the library every night and every morning, it was hardly against the law. As long as the books were returned before their due date all was well, in spite of small-man-syndrome Bruce's odd looks over his glasses. And by the end of the day, Indi felt as exhausted as Laura looked – except Laura was heading home to some abusive asshole husband and Indi was preparing to settle down on a collection of random cushions that soothed her soul. She longed to tell Laura there were alternatives.

## Laura

That woman, the casually fashionable one – Indi – was like clockwork. First thing this morning and then now. As usual, the last opening hour of the library attracted few customers and Indi moved around the aisles, long skirt making a whooshing sound. Laura wanted to tell her so many things, maybe because Indi didn't speak and there would be no pointed questions

to answer. The regularity of Indi's presence, a calm contrast to Laura's reality, had become a comfort, something soothing in her messy life. Then, one Thursday while straightening the plastic cases of the audio books, Laura looked out into the courtyard and suddenly realised part of Indi's mystery. More than that, she appreciated and understood it.

That night when Indi plonked her usual swag of books on the counter, Laura really looked at the titles for the first time. Seeking a clue, searching for some further interpretation of this mysterious person. But this time, whether Indi listened or not, there were things to say.

'We've got new pillows and cushions in the kid's area,' Laura's words were flippant but Indi read their intent. When you never spoke, every murmur, every noise had a nuance. You noticed things, like the sudden tension in Laura's hand as she turned the book over and the slight intake of breath. It was a new book, with

a unique audience. A title by former Prince Harry and Megan Markle: *Finding Freedom*. Indi's pale eyes didn't avert as usual but held Laura's in a knowing gaze. Coincidence that at that exact moment Laura's previously shattered rib ached like hell?

Their eyes found each other briefly and then snapped apart. It was Laura's turn to send a subtle message. As usual the conversation was with herself; with the desk; to the scanner, waving through the air.

'Can you believe, we have an important security update? The old alarm code was Bruce's birthday, Australia Day 1972.... 260172.' The pile of leaflets on the counter were addressed next.

'Not anymore though, it's his wedding anniversary now. Who would imagine someone would go there but anyway, 23<sup>rd</sup> of April this year – 230420.'

Laura chatted on as though no one, or everyone, was listening. Whichever. Just when she thought she had worked this strange woman out, she realised that Indi sensed her secrets too. Didn't want to overthink it though. Had enough to worry about. Then, over *Finding Freedom*, their eyes met once more. Understanding through silence. Until Laura said these words. Because, of course, Indi didn't speak.

'That exhibition about the pearling industry – it opens next week. Bruce has organised some expensive display pieces and so

we will have a security guard in overnight. Thought you might be want to know.'

### Indi

Sometimes Indi wondered if her choice of the strawberry shaped felt pillow with its sewn-on seeds was immature. But, as she nestled her head into the softness, next to the cushion puppy and the dinosaur, who really cared? There was a security with this warmth, dull lights and lines of books like bodyguards at attention. Indi loved the library, day and night.

Laura's apparently flippant announcement that a security guard was going to invade her space was not welcome. Mulga Gardens Library was more than a sanctuary for mornings or afternoons. Over time, this library had become a home. Early on it was a challenge, loitering by the audio books while tetchy fingers worked nimbly with the window latch. And then, with the last stragglers, she had left the library.

At first Laura was on guard about this but Indi's deliberately homely appearance had muted the fact that she may be important, or a threat. Indi had become good at reading expressions, a genius almost. Her past life had seen to that. She could pinpoint the exact moment that realisation crossed Laura's face.

Even while choosing her evening reading, Indi never relaxed her guard around fellow customers. They were seemingly mostly pleasant, unsuspecting individuals but whoever really knows? And then, once she had unlocked that window, she walked out through the main door just before Laura locked it. Then, Indi raced around the back, slithered herself through the glass opening and sprinted to log in the alarm code.

Tonight, though, Indi's evening was not as relaxed as normal. Even the strawberry pillow wasn't cutting it. The thought of a security guard conjured images that were actually quite the opposite. Even Laura, with hidden issues that Indi read like one of the thousand books on the library shelves, had lifted her eyebrows in warning. Indi was not happy with this security guard's upcoming intrusion. Freedom had become of her own making. She considered heading back out onto the streets. But not for long; there was now someone more broken than she was. Books had become Indi's way of communication. *Finding Freedom* – it was a message for herself, as well as Laura.

### Laura

Indi's fingernails are dirty as she slides the book across the counter. They rest in contrast to Laura's immaculate manicure, hovering just under the title. Her grip gives a subtle pressure

from which Laura releases the book, unaware that Indi had spent sleepless hours finding the right self-help title, from an author she had never heard of. *Make the Change*. Laura's eyes snap up but Indi's are already trained to meet them with a grey-green gaze that holds everything and nothing.

Then the next book: *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf. There was no doubt now. And as Indi had seen through the hideaway sleeves and a need to apply blue-grey eyeshadow on days like this, Laura needed Indi to know she wasn't the only one to discover secrets. Before locking up last night, Laura had rearranged the cushions in the kid's corner, burying the bright, felt strawberry way beneath.

Now, as she looked past the thin shoulders of her first and last visitor of the day, she could see it was on top. Now there was no question as to how Indi made it through the door every morning without Laura noticing.

'We have a guard in here from tonight. Bruce is setting up the pearl display today. Quite a fancy specimen apparently,' Laura said brightly, addressing the computer screen as the scanned books flashed across it.

'The security guard will be here all night of course.'

'Bruce can be so annoying,' Laura said conspiratorially to the scanning device. 'But I have to hand it to him, these regular

displays do bring a lot of interest. Not often we need a guard to come with them though.'

Silence, but what else did she expect. Guard, guard, guard – was Indi getting the message? Her hiding spot wasn't safe tonight.

'I'm leaving the kitchen unlocked – for him.' Laura slid the books across the counter.

'There's some food in the fridge that needs to be eaten.'

The words hung in the air. It was Indi's turn to break the gaze. Shuffling the books into the net bag, she bowed her head and went to the door.

'Have a nice day,' Laura said to the countertop. 'See you this afternoon.'

### **Indi**

The park was crowded today; families taking advantage of the late spring sun and the flowers that popped with colour in the well-maintained gardens. For a long time, Indi had forgotten about colour, during a time when life was a muted grey, internally at least. Books had taken her away from all that, both then and now, amazing how a riot of colour can spring from black words on a white page. She had always frequented libraries, haunted them maybe, drifting along the aisles like a silent ghost.

Mulga Gardens Library was different. Besides Laura the librarian and Bruce, the very caricature of a male librarian: bespectacled, officious, talking to himself among the shelves; there were other quaint touches to the place. One wall celebrated history: the opening by the then Governor of South Australia, the storm in the 50's that broke through the roof and flooded the non-fiction section and memories recorded by the archaic old microfiche, a relic of the past that also, ironically, linked people to the past.

Though Laura had hidden her latest bruise with eyeshadow, Indi spotted the broken capillaries that stained the whites of her eyes. Again, Indi had fought this connection to a kindred spirit. Bonding with people was dangerous. Normally, the unwanted intrusion of an overnight guard would have seen Indi choose another place to spend the night. She had spent plenty of nights curled in doorways or beneath bushes in this very park, sleeping like a wild animal, never fully relaxed, a watchful eye on the world at all times.

She had become too smart for that though, and empty houses and sheds had been a step up for a while. Until the library, which now seemingly provided food as well as shelter. Indi's stomach rumbled at the thought. She withdrew the books from the dirty string bag and tossed them aside on the wooden seat. After all, she hadn't really chosen them for herself.

**Laura**

There is an irony in silence. Not speaking can yell volumes. While Laura prattled on all day at work, she prayed the evenings would rush by, hardly opening her mouth. It was dangerous to tempt the devil. Stacking the dishwasher in their second-floor flat, Laura found herself wondering if the same thing lay behind Indi's silence. Fear. It had a way of shutting you down, turning you into an internal being.

Sliding the plates in, careful not to clink them together, Laura took a deep breath. He, Mike, hadn't even noticed last night's leftovers were nowhere to be seen. Butter chicken. She hoped Indi liked it. After work drinks had clouded Mike's observation skills.

In this tiny flat, there was no escaping him but as Laura pressed the button to launch the dishwasher into life, she heard beer induced, grumbling snores. Sometimes alcohol could be a blessing. Tonight, at least, she was safe. And her thoughts flew to the library.

**Indi**

Her late afternoon visit was usually uneventful but today bustling Bruce had the eastern corner transformed with fishing nets and sea creatures. If she spoke, Indi would be tempted to tell him pearls weren't found in nets. But she had long stopped caring

about other people's issues. At least until recently. And then, just before 4, o'clock, the highlight of the display arrived, a perfect grey-green ball formed by the wonder of nature and nestled on a velvet cushion in a locked glass cabinet. Laura had left her desk and peered at it for several long minutes. Indi stood there too and, as usual, conversation was one sided and directed at an inanimate object.

'Such a beautiful thing,' Laura said dreamily. A little shrug was accompanied by a short breath exhalation.

'I have a pearl in my engagement ring,' she said. But Indi, adept at noticing things, had never seen that on her slender fingers. Laura said nothing further. She had learnt, Indi realised, that not all feelings need vocalising to give them life.

There was no pretence of checking out books tonight. Laura caught Indi's eye in the fantasy aisle and offered a slight smile before dimming the lights and closing the door. No alarm required with a security guard due soon to watch over the illuminated cube and its treasure. The children's cushions had been moved to a side room – lockable, Laura had told the desk earlier while Indi lingered near. And the kitchen door, she reminded the chair, had been left open.

Butter chicken. One of Indi's favourites. She ate ravenously in the darkened study room, senses heightened when she heard

the door click open. A large man, clad in a brown security outfit, strode into the lit corner. Indi peeked through the vertical blind. He bent to peer in the illuminated cube, yawning slightly. A sliver of light caught on an angular jaw and bulbous nose. He turned and Indi shrunk back, chicken now sour in her mouth. The strawberry cushion had gone rotten. There was something else she needed in the kitchen. Urgently.

### **Laura**

Loneliness takes many forms, Laura thought as she slammed her car door, the library building looming in the distance. Indi was probably less lonely than she was, in a relationship that rotated on fear and subservience. Would the security guard have scared Indi away? Laura hoped not. And then, unexpectedly, there she was. The mysterious boho woman.

For the first time, Laura was seeing Indi outside of the library. She appeared even smaller and frailer in the light of day. The parcel Indi silently handed over was shrouded in a plastic shopping bag. Laura could feel the rigid spines of hardcover books and instinctively knew the question in her eyes would never have an answer. Because, right then, Indi turned and stepped quickly away. It was goodbye, Laura knew it. The guard had ruined everything.

Fiddling with her key, Laura let herself into the silent building and flicked on the bank of lights. Later, she would be glad she hadn't looked around first. She emptied the books on to the desk, breath catching in her throat as she read the titles. Agatha Christie's *The Body in the Library* and *The Pearl Thief* by Fiona McIntosh.

### **Indi**

Walking quickly through the park, Indi turned the grey-green bauble over and over in her pocket until she imagined her fingerprints had worn off. Which would be handy considering her history, Indi thought, allowing herself a rare moment of humour. Libraries had always been a refuge, ironically requesting silence, when over the years she had become the very epitome of it. But Mulga Gardens Library had, quite surprisingly, been a cure as well. And not just for herself. Silence was ironically full of information.

### **Laura**

There was no doubt now that being a bad judge of character was a flaw in her personality. First in life partners and then in a total stranger. Laura had foolishly imagined a kindred spirit in the boho woman and had even allowed her refuge and for what?

Turns out she was nothing but a common thief and Laura's fanciful notion of this mute delivering of messages through book titles had been ridiculous – until that last morning anyway.

Bruce had gone ballistic. Removal of the body of the security guard brought the type of publicity he precisely didn't want. As the local press reported, the guard had been stabbed by a knife from the library's kitchen, the pearl stolen. CCTV had saved Laura from suspicion, clearly showing an intruder in a flowing purple dress creeping up behind the hapless guard and stabbing him in the neck.

But Laura decided to take a leaf out of Indi's book and stay silent. With a practiced blank face, she told the police investigator she had no idea who this woman was. Perhaps she still admired Indi in some way. Maybe that was why Laura crammed an overnight bag with her most precious possessions when leaving for work that morning.

Unexpectedly, a parcel awaited her – left outside the library by an overnight courier and scrawled with an unsteady hand: Laura Librarian. Inside she found a book often requested by those looking for answers. Page 24 of 'The Secret' spouted advice to project your greatest desires into the universe. It was marked with a flimsy microfiche slide that Laura recognised from the box in the corner. On it, a sticky note, clearly from her own

library desk, penned with 'E 14'. Crossing the room as the lights flickered to life, Laura slipped the negative into the slide, guiding the clunky apparatus to E14 where a page of the Adelaide Advertiser was illuminated, dated twenty years previously.

*Guard arrested in prison rape. Dismissed from job.*

With the expert eyes of a skim reader, Laura absorbed the main points. The black and white photo showed the blurry image of a girl with frail features and a man, whose angular face and bulbous nose Laura had seen most recently covered in blood on the library floor. Laura returned to her desk, located some scissors and cut the microfiche into a thousand jagged pieces.

It was then Laura noticed another envelope, its grubby corner poking from page 101 where *The Secret* encouraged the reader to live their best life. The bank cheque was made out in her name and for an amount that made Laura sharply draw breath. Who knew the pearl was worth so much? And then, she clutched her overnight bag and headed back to the entrance. There was no point waiting for Bruce and offering any type of excuse for her sudden absence.

Silence had a way of conveying volumes.

## Kristin Murdock

Sharing a birthday with Agatha Christie, **Kristin Murdock** was bound to turn to crime – fictionally at least! An avid writing competition entrant and multiple award winner, Kristin finds plots everywhere, from an overheard sentence to walking past the ‘perfect place to hide a body’. Living on a farm in regional South Australia, her current project is a rural crime novel where the victim meets a grisly end courtesy of a sharply pointed bale hook.