

What It's Like to Be Alone
by May Cotton © 2021, 2022

It is Tuesday evening, and my family will be home tomorrow afternoon. After three full days of being alone, my fourth day is interrupted by a phone call from my bestie wanting to know what it is like to be alone, as I learn from her voicemail.

I am sitting outside in the 94 degree heat, enjoying my new table and chairs with their comfortable red cushions. I am listening to the sounds of silence. The air conditioner is only drowned out by the roar of a motorcycle. The chimes behind me tinkle musically in the wind. It becomes more than a breeze, stirring up strong currents of air whoosing through the yard.

A squirrel rushes up onto the patio, pauses when it sees me, backs off. Runs across the grass to the lilac, dashes up a limb. Stops to look at me again. Jumps to the next bush then onto the next. Drops to the ground and runs along the wall to the base of the bush closest to me. Up the trunk it rushes, takes up a sentry pose, watches me watching it until I speak aloud. Then it leaps into the tree and dashes up into the branches where there is nowhere else to flee but onto the roof. I do not hear it again.

When the air turns off for a moment the roar continues in the distance as the neighbor's air is also running, keeping our 100-year-old neighbor comfortable as she lives out her final days, getting progressively weaker and then stronger, losing ground and gaining, as so many do.

The sparrows flit around, dropping onto the grass to scavenge the cherries brought the night before from the neighbor's tree, the parent birds preparing to teach the young ones to feed themselves. I am struck by the realization that baby birds must learn to fly before they can learn to hunt or scavenge and feed themselves.

What's not to like about being alone? The silence is wonderful, even though it's not silence at all. Rather it is a cacophony of birdsong punctuated by distant machines carried on the breeze. I consider it silence because I hear no voices, no ringing of the phone since I turned off the ringers. I hope my regular contacts respect my need for quiet. (Later both asked if I was mad at them!)

Being alone lets me be exactly who I am without the worry of who or how I might offend. No need to interact, to pay attention, to consider what I'm about to say before I say it. To care if someone is listening when I begin talking to myself.

But for now I am not talking. I am writing instead, ruminating through my thoughts until I am distracted by the sights and sounds of the world around me. And then I write about them.

When I come outside to listen, I hear a tent meeting going on at the mega-church across the river. A rhythm of footfalls comes up the hill and recedes into the distance as the athlete runs out of earshot. An insect chirps its solo. Gabbers march in step down the hill.

FedEx chugs up the hill, its radio crooning to the tires; the breeze whistles through, carrying sounds from a distant neighborhood.

In the quiet, I am content.