

Stillville – Michael Cisco

IDIDN'T WANT TO think of it as "stillville," but the name forced itself on me. I found a little house and started living here. Even though I worked a town away, I chose to live here. Even though the house was more expensive and less convenient than an apartment near my place of work would have been, I chose the expense and the trouble. The price had not been especially high, but it was dear at my income. The house was not entirely sound when I bought it either. I knew nothing of home repair at the time. Living here compelled me to learn. I patched up the leaks in the roof. I replaced the windows in the back. I had to tear everything out of the backyard. For a time, it wasn't clear whether or not I could keep the garage. In the end, I did. It's standing out there now. I can see it through the rear window. When I turn my head, I can see the street out the front window. There's the house across the street, the tree, the parked station wagon, centered between the mailbox on one side and the driveway cut on the other side. It's as reliable as a painted mural. Above the street, the daytime sky alternates with the nighttime sky, and clear skies alternate with cloudy skies. Lights are turned on and off, but otherwise the scene is the same. Sometimes the station wagon is gone, sometimes there are no leaves on the tree. The stillness that brought me here never wavers, though. When I go to work, driving into that other town, I can see right away that the buildings and streets, parked cars and trees, aren't really still. They aren't incapable of motion. They only withhold their motion. They are trembling coils, poised with the momentary immobility of a snake about to strike. There's no peace in that merely temporary motionlessness, any more than there is in the brief pause before the roller coaster drops down its incline. The town I work in vibrates incessantly, especially at quitting time. Then everyone is rushing to change into another self and wring a little pleasure from life. People hurry themselves along like their own slave drivers, laying in supplies for the weekend. Pedestrians spray from the buildings like bullets. The clock fires its artillery over the rooftops. The tension varies over these volleys of hours without ever slackening. I've never visited that town at night, but I doubt it would be much different then. I imagine the wary unserenity of the street where I work under a blue night sky. The buildings would look like howling faces and glassy headstones.

My town at noon is quieter than that town would be at four in the morning, I'm sure. Moving here, for all the difficulties that it entailed, was exactly what I wanted. Nothing is ever going to happen to me here.

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Something is happening to me. I'm becoming more still. I'm undergoing the phases. Outwardly, just like everyone else here, I move. Of course, I move. The stillness is within. It grows inside me here, the same way it has for everyone else. It's active and in motion. All that activity and motion, though, arises from it and subsides back into it. There's no tension at all. There's no sense of lying in wait, no ambush. No waiting, really. It would be more accurate to say, everything becomes a form of waiting. No one here is trying to keep still. It's not something that can be accomplished. I can see there's something off about the idea that I would fixate on being still and then become still, because that would mean moving into a state of motionlessness, which makes no sense. The idea is the reverse. I have to stop moving, which means going with the flow, the silent flows, the flows of silence. Then I will be safe, right in the heart of the vaster current of time, carried along, motionless. No more learning. No need for concern. Asking for nothing to happen is like slamming on the brakes on a busy highway. If I really want nothing to happen, I have to siphon into one of the many eddies in the ribbon of events. Then I could glide frictionlessly from each instant to the next, let them mesh and blur into one perennial, muted outpouring of fraught color and jangled, senseless noise. Even all the trouble I had to take fixing up my house, wrangling with the bank, which was situated in the same town, was less and less disturbing. It was as if patching up the house were bringing it into closer accord with its surroundings. I had to see my house from the perspective of the town as a whole in order to integrate it, which made me a sort of unwitting agent for the town. This required a realignment of my thoughts, too. It would be more accurate to say that I had to change my way of thinking. My house was part of the bank of a river of quiet. My repairs were made slowly and with as little noise as possible. After I'd finished, the house looked no different, inside or out. It was important that it be unchanged on the inside, because this isn't a question of superficial appearances. "stillville" isn't quiet because people keep their dirty secrets well hidden, but because there are no secrets here. There are no hiding places or reasons to use them, unless the whole town could be considered a hiding place.

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Leaving town, going to work, is more and more like driving into a war zone. And yet, as my days lengthen in "stillville," this war affects me less, steadily less. Lately, I've simply found myself at work.

I went there without noticing it. The tedium and frustration of my commute is gone. At work, I do my tasks easily, regularly. Once I suffered for this job. I created patterns of work, which helped to ensure that I didn't overlook anything or miss deadlines. Unexpected changes would keep cropping up and disrupting these patterns, inducing a fierce distress in me that seems disproportionate now. After I'd been living in my new home for a while, I began to wonder if we were enjoying a period of greater regularity, with fewer surprises. Or, actually, no surprises. In a spirit of idle curiosity, I reviewed my calendar. To my surprise, I realized that the last few weeks had been as chaotic as any I'd experienced during my time with the company. By my count, more than half the events in it were struck through with long, steady pen-strokes and rescheduled with neat arrows. I could only marvel at my progress. My progress in slowing down my progress. Days that, at one time, would have wrung me out, would have had me raving to no one in my car as I drove to and from work, and left me fuming as I lay down to stare at the ceiling at night in lieu of sleeping, had passed me by in silence.

No more of that. Less and less, and then no more. I carry the quiet, without magic, or any effort, everywhere I go. I neither acknowledge nor avoid my neighbors. I am aware of them, as I'm sure they are aware of me. We grow in awareness of each other. This awareness depends on our being still. When I sit in my living room, I am aware of my neighbors all around me, sitting in their living rooms. When I pad silently upstairs to my narrow bed and lie down, I am aware of them lying on their narrow beds around me, like so many figures hovering in space, all the same distance above the ground. Those of us on this side of the block sleep with our feet to the east, and those of us on the other side of the block sleep with their feet to the west. Between the rows of our sleeping heads, there is a sloping gulf, like the fold between the pages of an open book. Each of us is a sentence, complete on its own line. The war goes on without us, somewhere else. It is not here. It is not in us.

Together, we join in a stillness that is greater than the sum of us, to which we have given a life of its own. It is our helper. We all want to join as closely as possible to it. Perhaps this is why we don't see each other or speak to each other. We do speak, and see, but we do it at a certain angle to each other. It's not quite a matter of keeping up appearances. After all, who are we appearing to? It might just be the last vestiges of an old habit. It could also be a little favor we do each other, giving each other the slightest nudge only so that we can turn with a quiet pleasure back to our own silence again. I think, though, that we do it primarily to reassure each other that our silence is not the kind that masks resentment or signals it.

Perhaps one day I will quit my job and remain here all the time. I think I would like that, but the power of this peace is strong. I don't need to quit my job, remain here all the time, because the peace is inside me. It is me. Not enough, but more and more. Is it that I want to live my life in a dream? I think what I want is to live without knowing or feeling it. I don't want to die. I know for a virtual certainty that none of us do. If you want to die, you die, you don't move here. You move here because you want to live without knowing it. You aren't looking to live some dream or other, an adventure of glorious sex and righteous violence. You want to live in a dreamy way, absently, wandering without being lost. You want to be a dream instead of being yourself. The dream I am becoming is not a dream of anything. In the dream I am becoming, the streets are the same, the houses, the people, the sky, my body, are all the same. The events of the day are the same. So, what's the difference? Time. It passes through me now. I'm becoming a perfect filter for time. It passes through me, and nothing clings. There's no trace of it. Nothing of me clings to it, either; nothing of me is borne away, nothing of me washes downstream, lodges on the bank. No one downstream knows I am upstream. I'm moving into the future without touching it, like a spaceman walking on nothing in outer space.

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"Oh my God!"

Your voice shook me like thunder. Suddenly I was awake, at work, blinking, and my hand—my hand was on fire. You were there, shock on your face.

I tried to review what had happened. I was in the little kitchen area at the office. I had been reaching for a paper cup. Someone had placed a coffee mug with a broken handle on the shelf beside the bundle of paper cups. I had mistaken where my hand should go, and the jagged end of the mug's broken handle had gashed the top of my hand. I stared down at the unbelievable blood, the redness, and nothing was muffled. You were there. You had been working with me for months, and I never paid you any particular attention before. Now you were sympathetically helping me, leading me unresisting into the women's bathroom, with some words of warning as we came in. That was where the first aid kit was kept, and you knew that. You washed my hand.

"Let me wrap it for you," you said.

You bound up the wound. It was your alarm, your compassion, the pain you felt on my behalf, that startled me out of my dream. That was why I noticed my pain. The pain was unpleasant, of course, but you saved me from obliviously walking around the office with blood dripping from my hand. As I imagined this, I had to imagine also the upset and confusion that would have created. No one just walks around dripping blood, that's true. I would have smeared it on the paperwork. There would have been questions. The prospect of answering questions shouldn't have alarmed me, but it did, in fact, the idea alone frightened me, quickened me, sent adrenaline to my stomach. I was awake again, in the old way, in the middle of the workday, afraid, in pain—but you were there, looking me in the eye with stunning compassion. You were what woke me up, not the pain or the fear.

“You look a little green,” you said. “Maybe you should go home.”

The idea that you would suggest that to me was almost funny. I smiled. As I smiled, I realized that I had been smiling at work in the usual way, at appropriate times, but that this smile was different because you were making me do it. No particular individual had made me smile in a long time; I had been smiling, when I smiled, because the general circumstances warranted a smile. But this time, I smiled because you compelled me to. How? Your actions made your warmth palpable to me. The warmth stayed in me after you had gone back to your desk. I could feel the smile lingering on my face, and I wanted to sniff the air in order to get a clearer impression of the fragrance that you were wearing that day. I found I liked it. But driving back home was more painful than it had been in months; I drove home feeling like a man being hounded by a pack of wolves. When I pulled into my driveway, I nearly failed to park the car in the usual way, and, when I had parked, I still had to sit at the wheel for a while before I could muster the willpower to get out. The sound of my breathing filled the car. I thought I might cloud the windows over. I wondered if the others were aware of that. When I finally did manage to get inside, everything about my house leapt out at me, and for a moment I was almost uncertain whether or not I had entered a stranger's house by mistake. Your face was somehow at work. Your look of compassion had taken me. Your fragrance—was I still smelling it, even here? Was it on my hand? No, but my hand still smelled like the soap in the woman's washroom, which you had used to clean it. I saw the white tile, the fluorescent light, the gleaming steel fixtures, the mirror, and you, a dark presence, dabbing my hand with a paper towel, transferring your gaze now from it to my face. Your eyes, full of compassion, haunting compassion, were like images of another planet.

Once I'd seen them I couldn't—

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I saw them, I kept —

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While I'm driving home—I saw them see me —

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Your bandage on my hand. Whenever it came into view, the sight of it startled me so much I had to suppress an impulse to slam on the brakes or swerve off the road. I tore off the bandage and threw it out the window.

When I crossed the town line, as usual I could feel the car pressing into the bank of silence, but there was a knot of something humming inside me. I parked. I walked up the flat paving stones to my front door in silence, with the long shadows of the passing day lying all around me on the ground, draped over my walls and my roof. I went inside and replaced my work clothes with my after-work clothes. My living room was like a kiln of emptiness. I sat in it, trying not to fill, but your eyes —

I looked down at my torn hand. My vision swam.

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From that day, I was afraid to see you again. You didn't frighten me. Something had gone out of line in me when I saw your eyes, though, because your eyes could never see things my way—you could join me in silence, but not in that silence. That silence was the domain of only solitary people. Even that isn't right; it isn't a landscape of isolated people, but an empty landscape, empty even of me; where there is a presence, but only as one, the pronoun "one."

Just the other day, I wouldn't have been able to refer to my heart without smiling. I mean, smiling with derision. The idea that I had "a heart," which was—was it only yesterday?—such a quaint and comical thing to think, was now the only thing, the only problem.

Driving in my car, I found myself litanizing your flaws, whatever I could think of—and it was all nonsense. I was someone who had preferred not to have preferences. How could I identify flaws? I knew you weren't perfect, but this was only abstract. We all know not to think in terms of perfection. And what was the point of trying to reason with something that had nothing to do with reason, and what was reason to me or me to reason? If I said a word to you about—it would make—

I only want to say numbly ordinary things to you and make no difference. I litanized you, thinking foolishly that I would find flaws and somehow talk myself out of—it was just one more way to think about you, and it only further provoked that quickening something inside me—my heart.

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If I said a word to you it would make—things—real, too real—

I'd be—more than exposed—I'd be concrete, all too real myself—

But I'm old! I'm old, I know how these things end, and they always end. Now things are beginning. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense that things should begin. Especially not now, when I've put myself past the point of any beginning. The point of no starting is behind me, but things are starting anyway. It's as if I'd failed. My will to stop wasn't really pure.

You spoke to me. Out of nowhere, you appeared—it was in the hallway, I was heading for the entrance. I was going for ... for lunch, I think. You asked me about my hand, if it was better, and before I knew what I was doing you had me in your eyes again, that same compassion that rang through me, harder than if you'd punched me. I told you it was all right, and I thanked you, but I wasn't professional. I stammered, fumbling for the words when the words were "thank you"—just "thank you." You smiled without a trace of condescension. You wished me well, that's what you said. What now? You had gone on, and I was going on, in the same direction. You asked me about my department, about my work. I found myself asking you mirroring questions about your department, your work. You said something about a deadline, and I found it funny, and laughed. You laughed with me. I parted from you at the end of the hall in a state of confusion. I didn't know what to do with myself. I had to grope in my mind for the old habits, which I thought were set in me, set in concrete with bars, and which I couldn't now even start to remember. They were on the other side of a gossamer-thin barrier all of a sudden, and I had to try before they would begin again. I spent the day working and, when I left, I was unsatisfied, as though I had done my work badly. I reviewed my work,

mentally, sitting in my parked car, and I couldn't tell if I had done anything wrong. Everything that I was supposed to do had been done. I'd missed no deadlines. The only thing—everything I did—I did distracted by your eyes, and now your laugh, and that brief conversation. I'd dragged that along with me into everything, so that for a moment I had an impulse to rush back to the office and check to see if I hadn't been unwittingly writing nothing but transcripts of what we said to each other, and descriptions of your behavior, rather than what I'd been ordered to write. I knew, though, that I hadn't, or at least, that nothing of that encounter had made it into the words I'd written. But some of the words I'd written, as part of what I had been ordered to write, were words you had used, that was the thing. It was as though your words were coming back to me in my own writing, not just the same words, but somehow, now, when I wrote them. What am I saying? They were specifically yours now, just because I'd heard you speak them, addressed to me. Words as common as “department” and “deadline” and “office” and “thank you.”

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An entire conversation, over the better part of an hour, this time. I can't remember a word, it all happened so quickly, and took such a long time. You said you thought you were a little sick of your usual spot, and that you wanted to give this place a try, and you asked me what was good there. Of course, I never ordered anything different. I found myself speaking to you, and you listened, holding me with your eyes, as I said things to you, ordinary enough things, and I was not voluble at all, but something inside me was going wild. It wanted to talk forever if only you would listen.

I never dream, but that night I dreamed I was driving through stillville, and sometimes flying along the ground without a car, more and more without a car, and watching as the houses and trees, street signs and silent corners, its dim blocks and vacant intersections, all faded into the gloom as I went by. It was like the planet was rolling out from under me in silence, disappearing without a struggle, vanishing sorrowfully. The sadness was so intense I sat up in bed, clutching my chest, gasping, and burst into tears.

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I realized that I was going to say something to you the next time I saw you. It was as if a voice had said —

“It's going to happen.”

I felt my hands turn to ice, and my temples began to pound.

“It’s going to happen.”

I was sitting in my living room, vacancy churning all around me, and I couldn’t sit still. Something grabbed my right hand and wrung it out hard—my left hand. I stared at my hands, the one kneading the other, and for a moment I thought I would burst into tears again. I stood and went to the window. I saw the street, everything in its accustomed place, and, over the roof of the house opposite, I could see the remoter lights of the main street shining up into the murk, like fixed and impassive stars. So then, I called on the stillness, and asked it to still you.

I turned from the window feeling hollow again, but uncertain, agitated, not knowing what I’d done. There was nothing else I could do, or could have done; I released myself, followed the pattern, went to bed. What’s done is done. Although I had no reason to expect it, I did sleep. I awoke a little before dawn. For the first time, I saw the sun come up over the town, and it was only this gradual intensification of light that gave any indication that a new day had begun. I wondered if the town had somehow miraculously depopulated during the night, leaving me inexplicably alone. Nothing stirred. There was certainly no dawn chorus, no whirl of traffic. No sound at all, not even wind. What’s done is done. I had the impulse to clap my hands, or to make some other sudden noise, just in case I had mysteriously gone deaf overnight, but I stifled it at once. It wasn’t for me to break the quiet. Besides, I had heard the faint noises my feet made on the floor, the indistinct clicks and taps of plates and cups as I must have eaten something. I wasn’t hungry, and there was a sort of taste, or perhaps only a texture, in my mouth, that suggested I’d eaten. I looked at the clock. Time to go to work. What’s done is done.

I drove into work feeling a little sick. My hands and feet went cold at once. I maneuvered the car through traffic in the usual way, changing lanes in all the same spots, at the same times, by the clock. As I made my way along surface streets, my nerves went wild. As I entered the building, I was seized by an impulse to run, to cry aloud, that took a moment or two to suppress. Confronted by the elevator, I struggled to swallow, and I couldn’t look up, so when I saw you, I saw you, at first, without seeing your face, which came a moment later. Then I saw your face, as you passed me without a word. There was no sign of recognition there. Nothing familiar. You had the face of a stranger once more, and your eyes were not special any more.

So, then one knew. One worked. One conducted oneself appropriately and worked efficiently. The numbers on the clock went through the regular phases of their daily variations. Then the day ended, and one went home.

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