

Quiet City

by Connor Tomas O'Brien

Back on the mainland, Fiona is calling it 'death', and I really wish she wouldn't. I suspect she's organised a funeral, and booked a notice in the classifieds of all the different papers. So how did I die? Fiona has probably constructed an elaborate story involving me capsizing my sailboat and getting caught in the rigging. That would explain the lack of a body. It would also explain the sudden disappearance of my sailboat.

There's something I want to say to Fiona, but you can't send emails back from Quiet City. I want to tell her she's got a real bad case of the *blah-blahs*. I want to tell her that things can be different. That a life is waiting for her right here, and it's not at all like what they're saying.

When I was younger, I read a book about the Spaniards sailing to South America in search of precious metals. The Incas couldn't understand the Spaniards' lust for silver — the metal was prepossessing, but useless; it didn't seem much worth fighting for. When it was put to them, the Spaniards couldn't explain it, either. From a distance of years upon years, however, the author of the book understood it clearly. The Spaniards valued what was hard to find. They valued what was scarce. This was something I thought about a great deal when I sailed to Quiet City.

Quiet City is slow and it is beautiful. There are rules here, but they are only soft rules, without hard consequences. We are provided with a daily ration of a half-thousand words, which can be forfeited for access to the Very Silent Place at the peak of the mountains overlooking the city. I travelled there yesterday. When you turn to face the forests, it's the most alone you can ever hope to be.

There's no way to track word count exactly, but that's not the point — the ration system is symbolic. Every word spoken here cuts

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through the silence like pyrotechnics. There is no waste, no small talk, no speaking for the sake of speaking, no shouting just to turn heads. Most people, I have found, don't use their five hundred. Around these particular people, every muted utterance is a thunder. An elderly man speaks only in haiku. He's probably spoken a hundred words this month. Some people don't speak at all.

Things become so clear when you get away from the babble. For example: I'll bet you haven't looked properly at a tree before. Yesterday I spent five hours looking at the birch out front of my new house. On the continent, people would have called me crazy, but that's just what people do here in Quiet City.

I haven't spoken aloud in three days. I will tomorrow, I think, but only if I've got something great to say.

Back in August, before I decided to sail to Quiet City, Fiona and I stood at the entrance to the Fifty Thousand Club and watched one man shoot another man in the face. The gunman started out a nobody, but his face on television turned him into a someone. It was a fame killing. The gunman had done the sums and realised it was worth a life in prison to increase his follower count a thousandfold.

Fiona and I earned our fame the old-fashioned way. We worked hard, streamed often, and had a brilliant publicist. I was a professor of philosophy at the university, which involved me posting nuggets of glittering profundity to my lifestream on the quarter hour. Things like, "He who does not stream exists for himself, but he who streams exists for the world" and, "When everything is online, we will have made God." My unique brand of philosophy was honest, in that I had a good deal of faith in the world we had created.

Fiona worked as an actress for a website designed to allow men to observe women in everyday situations. Over seventy thousand men (and certainly more than a few women) would watch Fiona on weekdays sipping coffee and stapling papers from a bogus office cubicle. Fiona enjoyed the work of Dog-Washing Girl and Laundry-Day Girl but told me the rest had no talent, particularly Sushi-Eating

Girl, who spread her wasabi wrong and always chewed too vigorously.

Fiona and I were compatible because we were both much-searched. We were both at the top of our respective Googles, comfortably within the most famous fifty thousand human beings on the planet. Opportunities became available to you when you were a Fifty Thousander. You were respected. You got the best tables. Sometimes people would bow at you in the street. If you ever saw a Dirt-Clodder — those wallowing the pits of the deepest obscurity — you could legally force them to shine your shoes.

Occasionally, of course, you slipped. The system was complex, but largely based on the number of followers subscribed to your lifestream — with conditions in place to prevent blatant fame fraud. Fiona was always afraid of falling too far down the rungs, into the murky half-obscurity of the lower forty thousands. Or worse. Some nights, when she thought I was asleep, Fiona would pray to Google.

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I believe the man who speaks in haiku is writing a novel. At the supermarket yesterday, he walked up to me and said:

*Black flood on pallid snow;
Here are my notions, slowly;
Wait until you see.*

I stood there with my canned beans and smiled mutely. I wanted to tell him, "I haven't read a book in fifteen years." Books are slow. On the mainland, the preference is for short, fast bursts of constant noise. To read a book, even in part, would require stepping away from the lifestream for whole hours at a time. To write a book, you'd have to disconnect for months or years. Over that time, you'd slip so far down the rungs that winning the first division fame lottery couldn't save you. You'd become a Dirt-Clodder for eternity — or until the end of Google, whichever came sooner.

I like the idea of the man who speaks in haiku coming to Quiet City to write. The daily ration extends to words written, ideally also to words thought. If the man writes in five hundred word blocks, every letter scribbled must be necessary, every sentence must say a

hundred things at once. When the man finishes his novel, it will set this place ablaze.

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On the mainland, everybody is worried about disappearing. There is a belief that once you reach a certain level of obscurity — say, once the number of people subscribing to your lifestream flatlines to zero — you may simply cease to exist. There's no way to prove it one way or the other, because the sudden dematerialisation of anybody with no followers would simply go unnoticed.

One night, that same August as the shooting, Fiona broke down in sobs and whimpers and made me touch her all over. I know what you must be thinking, but there was nothing sexual about it. Fiona wanted reassurance that she wasn't passing into oblivion. She said she didn't feel as solid as she did yesterday — that, from some angles, she could see right on through herself and out the other side. Her follower count had dropped below a hundred thousand for the first time in years and she was on the verge of tumbling from the ranks of the semi-famous to the only-slightly-noticed. What if she woke up tomorrow, not a Fifty Thousander, but a Dirt-Clodder? What then?

Fiona and I were always around one another, but only half-heartedly, like everybody. We spent most of our time shouting into the void, posting to our lifestream for the benefit of the fans we would never meet, but who made us real and gave us weight. I would kiss Fiona on the cheek and see her computer monitor close-up, as a catch-light on her cornea. She'd have a hundred windows scattered across the screen like playing cards, and would be typing to fans, begging them to tell their friends to subscribe to her stream. I would make love to Fiona while tapping out my latest short theory, which I'd post up immediately, then wait for the responses to come rolling in.

If you weren't a fan, you were a potential fan, and if you weren't a potential fan, you were of no use whatsoever. The streets on the continent were full of strangers rushing up to strangers, bearing cards embossed with their lifestream usernames. "I'll follow you if

you follow me,” strangers would whisper. Everything was part of a race to the top. To become the most famous person in the world, of all time, ever: things would become clear, then. Life would have a meaning.

I've spent the morning out on my boat. The water around Quiet City looks like glass from a distance, and if you drift through slowly enough, you can see right down to the bottom. There's a girl that watches me from the shore, and she looks just like you, Fiona. I know it's not you, though, because you're so afraid of the very idea of this place that there's no way I can imagine you buying a sailboat to follow me out here.

The difference between you and this girl is that I can see she sees things. I'm not sure if I can explain this properly. Did you ever catch sight of that tag scrawled on the wall of the subway station by our block? It wasn't ever cleaned away, because it was written small and nobody noticed. If you want to know, it wasn't the shooting — or your first breakdown, or your second — that made me realise I had to leave. It was those two words on that concrete subway wall: “Never wonder”, written in permanent marker, in shaky, uneven script. I began to notice things after that. I began to realise that the world is delicate, unassuming, waiting to be uncovered.

So this girl, who watches me from the shore: she looks like you, but the way she *looks* is different. Your eyes always seemed tired, and they moved so quickly — scanning, scanning, from one thing to another, and on again. You were always preoccupied, and it took me thirteen years to notice, because I was preoccupied also.

This girl stares. I call her a girl, but maybe she's older than you are. She may be as old as the man who speaks in haiku. She may even be his lover.

Her eyes are young, though. That's the thing.

I'm not sure why she's watching me, but does it matter? Staring isn't so bad. She might find elegance in the puff of wind in the sails, the glint of the water as it splits before the bow. There are a million little things out here worth noticing. On the continent, you wouldn't

see this. You'd be preoccupied, incapable of focus, your telephone connecting you to the promise of something better.

I want to see you, Fiona. This started out an exercise designed to tame my mind, to approach my life in words with a deliberateness that can only come by stamping on the breaks. Now I realise what this really is: my letter to you; my explanation, my apology, and my defense. It's taken me four days to put things in order: five hundred words a day, no more and no less. That's why I haven't had any words left to use to speak. That's why I couldn't talk to the man who speaks only in haiku about his novel.

Now I'm on my boat, and I'm in the middle of the ocean, between Quiet City and the mainland. A little bit further and I'll be within the bounds of the mainland's wireless, connected to the lifestream, able to send this back to you.

I hope you'll have the time to read it fully before your attention wanders.

