

## NO EXCUSES FOR THE LIVING

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The dead own the best real estate in town. The cemetery is on the crest of a hill, halfway up a mountain, and its height offers the gravestones peekaboo views of the harbor. The village is quaint by any measure -- home to 4,000 year-round residents, though that number increases tenfold from Memorial Day to Labor Day. It's a tourist town, and every year another share of residential real estate is carved off for Airbnb entrepreneurs, housing conglomerates, and digital millionaires. Even the lobstermen have been pushed farther and farther out year after year, and it seems the only people who are safe are those from the old families, the ones who migrate back and forth between their local homes, passed down through generations, and their winter estates. Their status is rarely encroached upon unless one counts the inconvenience of mounting traffic on Main Street during the high season.

If we agree that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the God-given rights of any American, then let's define those rights as contingent upon food in our bellies, clothes on our backs, and a roof over our heads. What happens when the latter becomes nearly impossible to secure even as every restaurant, shop, grocery store, gas station, and hotel decries the lack of available employees for any given shift? Could it be that sleeping in cars or bunking with five strangers in a three-bedroom apartment is poor incentive to wait tables, no matter how desirable the location?

I'm among the blessed. I rent a funky converted barn nestled into someone's yard. For now, that is. If my luck holds out.

The landlords know they have me over a barrel. My windows don't close. Portions of the ceiling have flaked off from snowmelt seeping in around the casings of the skylights. The insulation in the walls

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slunk into the baseboards sometime in the nineties. During winter storms, I light candles and watch them flicker and threaten to extinguish and dread the nights when the power goes out. At the end of my first year, my landlords agreed to renew my lease, but they've never countersigned it. I've asked. Repeatedly. It would be nice to have something like security, but they keep putting it off. The emails are replied to with platitudes but no attachments. *Sorry. It slipped our minds. We'll get it right over to you.*

When our schedules sync up, we exchange polite smiles and carefree waves across the lawn. I mimic lichen on a rock. I try to become a part of the landscape, knowing, at any moment, they can sentence me to a state of humiliating desperation. My nervous system buzzes with a constant grinding fear, and I live in terror of awakening to a text informing me I have a week to relocate. They can do that should the impulse to cash in become irresistible, and even though I've worked consistently for 35 years, I somehow find myself on the persistent precipice of homelessness.

I can't remember the last time I slept through the night.

A drumbeat resides within me. A wordless pulsing pounding that wakes me night after night. When my eyes open, the anxiety hits. A glance at the clock inevitably reads the wee hours. Again, and again. Night after night. If body and mind both require sleep to refresh, then I am a rotting apple, a potato growing vines from its eyes. It's a problem. I've become erratic. I walk through the day with worried voices in my head, and their clamoring drowns out my thoughts until only one remains: refresh, refresh, refresh.

Like a computer error.

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It's bad enough that the seas are boiling, the gulf stream stuttering and stalling. Daily train wrecks. School shootings. The national debt. Wars. Earthquakes. Floods. Fires. The horsemen ride, and still, the mundanity of life persists, amplified now by these incessant drums like a constant call to arms. I stand at the ready, sword loose in its sheath, prepared to accompany my cohort into our dark oblivion even though there's no road sign to point the way. I am bolstered only by my heritage of manifest destiny.

Grab those bootstraps, baby. God helps those who help themselves.

I do my best to heed the drums when they wake me in the night, but not right away.

At first, I lie there, pillow crammed over my head, my eyes clamped closed in denial, letting time pass in fifteen-minute increments while my brain buzzes unintelligibly, mimicking the static from an old TV, the kind that summons poltergeists.

I want to squawl. To kick and scream. If I were an infant, my mother could bundle me into a stroller and roll me to sleep. Such thoughts are a sure sign of weakness.

Quit your bellyaching, girlie. Walk it off.

That's what the old-timers would say, so I leave the cocoon of my bed and head into the night.

Fortunately for me, this is a walking town. Even hours before dawn, it's safe to go out alone. After tying my shoes, I check my digital companion, and its silent clockface calls for rain. I slip it into my coat pocket so my body can be identified if I fall into a ditch.

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It's the polite thing to do. The moment I step outside, I'm wrapped in a blanket of moisture. The sky is flannel, the streetlights shrouded in fog. I am the noisiest thing on the block—my footfalls crunching on the gravel path through the yard. For a moment, I imagine I am the drumbeat, infused with purpose from the steady pace of my steps, then my shoes hit the pavement, and I return to my hostage status.

At the street, I go left, following the route that will lead me uphill into the woods. The houses are quiet, their windows dark, though I sense my sleeping neighbors stir as I pass, like the restless dead when a descendant walks over their graves. I am disrupting our collective rhythms. Come morning, their doors will open in synchronized waves, and each house will spill forth its inhabitants to their daily routine. The only conversation will be that of mothers coordinating with their children in a rush of forgotten bags and buckled seatbelts. Among the unaffiliated, a simple head nod or a slightly raised hand will do for salutation. No extraneous conversation is permitted. We are all preoccupied with the drums.

A quarter mile into my walk, a bridge appears before me. I slip around the barricades that warn tourists the way is closed. Beneath the bridge, the river rushes its constant course to the sea, and I pause there to be lulled by its ancient passage. There is no light reflected on the water, but I feel the coolness of the air and hear its comforting splash and gurgle. I let the current soothe me. I allow it to drown out the beating in my head.

For a moment, I slip beyond time. I make sense as a being in space. The river runs. It has carved a convoluted course from a hidden mountain spring down to the harbor. It whispers, “time time time

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it flows flows flows it is is” over the rocks and under the trees with steady unhurried consistency. There has always been water in this river; it has not yet run dry. Not even when the politicians scream. Not even when the streets are full of picketers. Not even when refugees float to shore only to be turned away. The water flows. It’s what it does.

The shrouded stars, the consistent stream, the steadfast hillside, these are not enough. The persistent buzzing is still there, demanding too much of my cleverness and enterprise. I long to lay down the gauntlet. To reply to the nagging voice, “But look at this beauty. It is here. I am here. We are here. Look at us. Aren’t we wonderful? We must be so brave to be born.”

A lovely sentiment, but one to be stifled if I want to keep a roof over my head. Last summer, my entire division was eliminated. Fatalities of mergers and acquisitions where we were found less valuable than the intellectual property we created. I’m one of the lucky ones. I was saving for a down payment on a house, but after losing bid after bid after bid, that nest egg was left to sit in my savings account, a bulwark against the then unforeseen future when my \$5 billion company determined my talents were worth less than the products I’d previously produced.

Boom. Boom. Boom goes the drum. Humility. Loyalty. Service. There is no profit in such virtues. It means nothing that the river doesn’t concern itself with its reputation. That the mountain does not count its followers. To emulate them is to perish. Be more. Want more. Get more. The drum beats. I walk on.

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The road rises beneath me once I'm across the bridge. I cross another street, the road rises again, a steeper angle now as it yearns toward the sky and the infinite. I turn at random, street to street— my only desire a sense of momentum.

Out of the darkness, under a canopy of trees, manifests a swiftly moving shadow. It's a dog. He appears as though he has sprung from the earth itself. He comes toward me with speed and purpose, a missile on target lock. I stop dead and watch. He's a large breed the color of steel wool. I brace for impact.

His giant head fwumps into my hands, burying them in a muff of thick dark fur. He is damp and exultant. He bounces in greeting, and I sway involuntarily, fighting to keep my footing in the torrent of his delight. My heart lifts. Yes, friend, I, too, am out of the house without permission. We share our secret wordlessly. Smiling. Untroubled by the time of our meeting. A play bow. A jump. A giggle. Then, he's gone, bounding down the hill toward home. I resume my walk to nowhere, now scented with the musk of wet dog, somewhat healed by the medicinal balm of his unburdened spirit.

At the steepest incline, the trees fall away. The hill breaks into undulations as it meets the base of the mountain, and I ignore a sign on the shoulder declaring this way closed from dusk 'til dawn. As though graveyards have visiting hours.

Names crowd around me. Smith, because there is always a Smith, but also Clairmont and Barrett and Granger and Stone. Some names are solitary, others come in echoes: Stone Stone Stone, Granger Granger Granger. A space where the next Granger will slot himself in among his ancestors once the drumbeat catches up to him.

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Through the tree trunks, I catch glimpses of Penobscot Bay, and I slow my pace to linger among the dead. A petulant inner voice has the audacity to envy their security. These residents aren't going anywhere. Their debts have all been paid.

Above me, the sky is muffled and low, wrapped in its woolen blanket. Below me, there is the little town, the sea, the world. White steeples pierce the treetops, one for every quarter mile of Main Street, like a fail-safe to catch any wayward who gets past the first, the second, or the third. The founders provided their populace with plenty of opportunities for salvation.

The nearest church has been turned into condos. I hear there's a hot tub in the steeple. It feels like a long way to climb for baptism, and I wonder how many have been redeemed in its waters. Does the laughter drown out the penitent heart? Does the champagne diminish the benediction? Perhaps all the pulpits of the world should be replaced by modes of revelry. Perhaps, we should slip naked into the soup, bare-assed before the congregation, and share songs of conquest. After all, it is the new scripture, these songs of the self.

I sit down in the grass and lean my back against a headstone, Holden, it reads, and I feel no animosity from below. I peer through the rows of stones to the tree-lined streets. Here, finally, I have gained some distance from the drumbeat. I know it's still there. It waits for me at my doorstep. It will come screaming in with the dawn as it always does. I look at the little houses, their inhabitants trapped behind their own walls of worry, and wonder how it all went awry.

There is nothing for it but to sit among the dead and dream of sleep.