



Stephan Walke

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The customer orders a coffee and asks for a loaf of day-old bread. While the barista pours, the tuneless bugle call comes over the radio, drifting through the bakery din like a dull memory—an opaque guilt. She puts the pot down and stands still for the two minutes of silence. The held breath that makes children think of all the things they shouldn't do.

She stands watching the black liquid in the mug. Bubbles turning in a dying spiral and disappearing one by one. She avoids eye contact with the customer. It's easier when there is always movement. People don't notice when someone's eyes skirt their face, rest on a mouth or a nose before fleeing to the safety of a task like pouring milk or wiping a counter. But when there is silence, without movement, the loneliness of cities finds people gazing at their shoes and into empty cups.

She likes the idea of pause. Not a smoker, she still goes on the back steps next to the dumpster for smoke breaks with the bakers. Chipping loose mortar from between the haggard bricks with her fingernails. Letting large objects go out of focus, as though her eyes were laying down to rest. Delighting in the cold halt to the movements of the day.

She listens to the fridge kick into a hum. She hears the customer breathing, and the uncomfortable rustle of his wet jacket as he shuffles. She enjoys the vulnerability of facing the moment, with everyone else. Witness to the other worlds which people inhabit. The discomfort we share in stillness.

This is why she sometimes visits churches on her days off. She doesn't approach their grandeur like a destination. She enters chapels and cathedrals as a deviation. As though attracted to a rare flower off the side of a forest path. She enters for the solace of a silence without context. For a couple minutes of silence.

