

Ode to the Visible World

by Michael Pollock

When the table conversation died down that night, and the room fell silent, Will's youngest niece Dakota glanced at him from across the table and said, "So, Uncle Will. Tell us what happened at your job."

"Shh," someone said, "Dakota."

"God, you're an idiot," her brother said. "A complete imbecile."

His family's discomfort had been evident to Will since he arrived, especially when his daughter had left the room. Everyone struggled maintaining eye contact with him and every conversation felt formal, rehearsed and inauthentic. They fumbled for subjects to discuss and tried to make everything sound interesting, like there was a point to these stories. And they continued to measure their words—as if mentioning downed tree limbs in the suburbs might lead to more provocative subjects and send the conversation into dangerous territory.

The worst part was the lengths they took to avoid touching Will. They all maintained a safe personal distance, not leaning or brushing against him, or worse, using objects or furniture to separate themselves—as if the far side of the kitchen island was a natural and comfortable position for conversations to take place. When he sat down at the dining room table, the person to his left scooted away, and the person to his right stood up, presumably for more food, and then never returned. The room thinned and only a few remained: Dakota and her brother—who were being punished for not finishing their plates—and a couple of others who'd started eating late.

For years, quiet moments of tension like these were reserved for Will to perk up and begin one of his rants. His rants focused mostly on corporate conspiracies and the powerlessness and

ignorance of Americans to recognize them, and their apathy to fight them. Republicans, Democrats, it didn't matter. Corporate interests had stripped any sense of goodwill or optimism for the working class; cynicism was the answer.

In recent years, his rants centered on his job. They all knew how sensitive he was about his work, how poorly he was treated, how overqualified and undervalued he felt he was. His rants about it were legendary, humorous in the way he got so worked up about the latest corporate gaffe or some managerial decision that outraged him, which went against the grain of his politics. His family indulged these rants at times, depending on their mood, but in recent years and considering last year's blowup, it was clear they intended to avoid it from happening at all. Will's wife, who'd left him earlier that year, told him it was like a broken record that turned endlessly inside him. It's a performance, she said, that comprised the better part of his personality now.

The room had fallen completely silent and everyone looked down at their plates.

Will smirked.

"Actually, Dakota," he said, calmly "there's nothing to tell. I left last month."

"You quit? Really," Dakota said.

"What," someone replied.

"Hey, everyone," Dakota's brother called out. "Listen up, Uncle Will quit his job."

A few poked their heads into the dining room; others came in with their half-eaten plates of food and sat down.

Will smiled and explained what had happened. He was tired of all the bullshit and after a particularly long week, he walked out on Friday. The company called him the following Monday and offered double his rate to come back but he still refused.

It was clear from his expression that Will regarded this as a triumphant moment, and up until that point, it had felt that

way. But, somehow, saying it aloud and hearing the words echo in the dining room, it sounded sad, pathetic and reckless to him.

Didn't he have a daughter to worry about? A divorce to finalize? And what was he going to do now? Did he have any plans to make money?

His family congratulated Will on his decision and appeared supportive, but right before he left his mother's house, he went to the hall closet to get his daughter's jacket and he heard whispering upstairs. He listened, but only caught the tail end of something, which sounded like, "...who walks out on their job. Tell me?"

Outside the house, Will's mother walked him to his car. Will buckled his daughter into the car seat and then he climbed into the driver's seat and rolled down his window. His mother stood beside him, but the garage spotlight blinded him and all Will could discern was his mother's profile, her frizzy hair, her veined hands, the outline of a wart on her left cheekbone.

"I always worried you wouldn't feel differently when you quit your job," she said. "But you seem happy."

"I am. Really," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm fine," he said, shading his eyes from the glare.

"I want you to be happy," she said. "The both of you."

"Me too," he replied.

He started the engine and waved goodbye, and as backed out of the driveway, his daughter was asleep.

His mother's house was far from the city, way out in the country, along dark and windy roads that Will knew well driving as a teenager. When he turned off his mother's street and onto the next one, he cut the wheel hard and crossed into the left lane for a moment before drifting back to the right. He and his friends used to do this in high school to scare one another, to perk things up.

He hated having done this, but he did it again at the next intersection. And then, again, at the next, but this time he drove in the left lane for about a quarter mile. After he crossed the

stone bridge, he came to a particularly dark section of road, where, against all logic, he switched off the headlights.

At that point, anything could have appeared on the road: an animal, a fallen branch, a discarded mattress, a lost tire, a broken-down vehicle, anything, and it would have been over. Or, if he misjudged or doubted himself in any way, he could careen off the road and hit a tree. These were the sort of things that occupied him and his friends in high school. What would it be like to come so close to death?

He'd forgotten how different driving was without headlights, with having only the sense of sound to guide him. Pebbles shot up from the tires and showered against the floorboards, the transmission rumbled, the engine belts squeaked wildly.

He used to think driving without headlights was almost like flying. At first it felt that way. Then Will felt paralyzed by the uncertainty ahead. His windshield was completely dark and the whole world narrowed into something that he tried to imagine, whose impact he awaited, but was not there.

He realized how stupid and self-centered this was and reached for the switch to turn them back on. But he waited a moment longer, hoping this feeling would pass and the flying would return. The wheels spit stones, the engine moaned, and for a split second he heard the trickle of a stream and a dead leaf shift in the wind.

All the while, he imagined objects impacting the car, the body of a deer hitting the windshield, a mattress thumping underneath the car, a rusty wheel rim shattering the bumper.

Finally, he switched on the lights and when he did, there was nothing there. Will's car was in the exact center of the road, straddling the centerlines, proceeding at a sensible speed.

Suddenly, he jerked the wheel to the right and began to skid. The wheels began to spit debris and soon the car was going up an embankment, and as the car jumped over rocks, his headlights shook wildly at the trees ahead.

He pushed hard on the brakes, but the car continued to travel up the embankment. Will's heart pounded, his palms sweated, and as the car neared to a halt, he glanced in the rearview mirror to see his daughter's body pitch forward against the harness belt, and her limp body and face distort from the force of the stop. Her eyes opened briefly and, when the car stopped completely, she jerked back into the seat and she slumped into the same position before closing her eyes again. He looked at her face, which had returned to its normal shape, and watched her mouth twitch once before falling back into a familiar position of sleep.

He glanced at himself in the mirror and was horrified at his expression. No shame or humiliation, instead, he appeared indifferent, which wasn't possible, not after this. He cocked his right arm and punched himself in the temple as hard as he could twice, until he saw stars.

He couldn't see anything and his ears began to ring and throb. He switched off the headlights and waited and hoped he wouldn't be spotted.

The world seemed so unreal and strange in that moment that Will felt he could transform himself, that he could close his eyes and wake up somewhere, anywhere he wanted to be, without feeling it was out of the realm of possibility.

A moment later, however, he heard a car and saw the trees in the distance begin to light up. Then, the car popped over the ridge ahead.

Will took his foot off the brake, turned the wheel and the car pulled away from something that clunked the car and then he rolled down the hill pretty easily, before pulling free of the embankment.

He started driving slowly then picked up his pace. The alignment was off, the car was pulling to the right, but he decided the damage wasn't bad: it could be fixed. By the time he approached the car, he was maintaining a sensible speed, staying in the lane, and after he passed the car, the road began to feel ordinary again, as if nothing had happened at all.