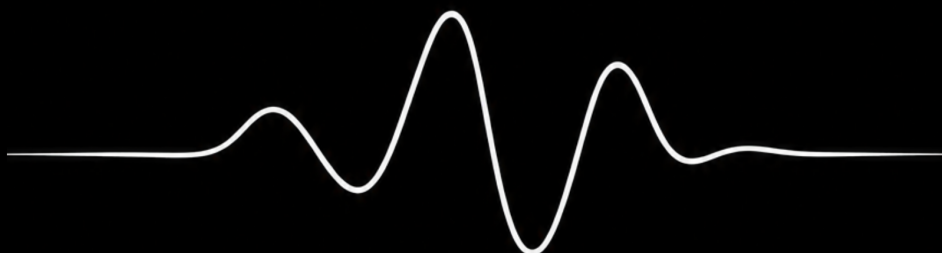


A USER'S GUIDE TO SURVIVING THE QUIET



MARCIN WOJDYNA

A User's Guide to Surviving the Quiet

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This book talks about some heavy stuff.

If it gets too much, put it down for a bit. Read something else. Make tea. Message someone. You can come back to it later.

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For whoever it finds.

I don't know if this is the beginning.

The first night was the longest.

Not because anything happened.

Because everything didn't.

I keep expecting a sound that doesn't come.

I don't know what sound.

I'd know it if it came.

The kettle clicked off and I forgot why I had boiled it.

This happens.

I stood beside it for a while, letting the steam soften the underside of the cupboard.

Eventually I made tea.

Not because I remembered wanting tea.

Because hot water had already happened, and it seemed rude not to continue.

There are no planes today.

There may have been no planes yesterday.

There may be planes all the time and I have only just begun listening for them.

The sky does not comment on this.

I have been sleeping in the chair.

Not because the bed is uncomfortable.

Because the bed is for two people, or for one person who remembers being two.

The chair makes no such assumptions.

It fits exactly one person, oriented toward the window, at an angle that catches the morning before the morning has fully committed to itself.

I find this useful.

Instructions for the morning, if the morning feels like too much:

Do not begin with anything that requires a decision.

Water first. Then the window. Then, if possible, something outside the window worth looking at briefly. A bird. A cloud doing something minor. A person moving through the street like they know where they're going.

This is enough of a beginning.

The rest will follow or it won't.

Either way, you've started.

There are things I have stopped doing.

More the way a path closes when no one walks it.

Quietly, at the edges first, then further in.

I no longer check the time before making tea.

I no longer check the time after.

I make tea when the light in the kitchen has a particular quality.

I cannot describe the quality.

I know it when I see it.

This seems like enough to go on.

Instructions for if the house feels too large:

Choose one room.

Not the best room. Not the room you think you should be in.

The nearest room that contains a chair, a window, or a surface capable of holding a cup.

Stay there until the house returns to its usual size.

It will.

Mostly.

There is a mark on the wall I have never noticed before.

I have lived with this wall for years.

Apparently we were not as close as I thought.

I have started talking to the plants.

Not instructions. Not encouragement. Just the occasional observation when I pass through the kitchen and they look like they're having a difficult morning.

They seem to appreciate the company.

I do too.

Neither of us is going to mention it.

The milk ran out on a Tuesday.

I didn't replace it until Friday.

Coffee is fine without it, it turns out.

I don't know why I kept buying it.

The bread goes faster than I think it will.

I don't know why I'm surprised by this.

I've been eating bread my entire life.

I know how quickly bread goes.

And yet every time I open the bag and find the last two slices, it's unexpected.

Instructions for if the day feels borrowed:

Use it gently.

Do not make plans that require the whole of you.

Do not promise yourself a transformation.

Put one thing back where it belongs.

Drink something before it goes cold.

If the day was borrowed, return it in roughly the same condition.

I opened the fridge and looked inside with the seriousness of someone expecting instructions.

There were none.

There was half an onion, three eggs, butter, and a jar of something I do not remember buying.

This was enough information for lunch.

Not a good lunch.

But lunch.

There are three tins of tomatoes at the back of the cupboard.

Still there.

Still waiting.

The light in the kitchen this morning had the quality I cannot describe.

I made tea at the right time.

Instructions for opening a window:

You don't need a reason.

The reason is that the air inside has been inside for a while and the air outside has not, and the exchange is simple and costs nothing and takes less than thirty seconds.

Open it.

Leave it for as long as the temperature allows.

Close it.

The room will be different for having done this.

You may not notice.

The room will know.

There's a window in the back room I don't use.

I opened it today. Left it open all afternoon.

I don't know what I thought would come in.

Something did, though.

Just air.

That might have been it.

The fridge hums.

I noticed it today, properly, as a sound.

Before this, it was part of the texture of the room. Below hearing, below attention, just present the way presence is before you start paying attention to it.

Now I hear it every time.

I don't know if this is progress.

There is a particular silence that arrives after rain.

Not during. After.

When the sound of it stops and the world adjusts to having been washed.

I have been trying to be awake for it.

Some mornings I manage it.

Some mornings I sleep through and find only the damp pavement and the smell of it, which is the next best thing and sometimes better.

Instructions for when the noise stops:

Do not try to replace it.

The urge will be there. The radio. The television left on in the other room. Something that sounds like company without requiring anything back.

Resist this for as long as you can.

The silence is not absence.

It is the first honest thing to happen in some time.

There is a word for the feeling of a house at a certain hour.

I don't know what it is.

It's the feeling of furniture that has been in the same position long enough to have opinions about it. Of a room that knows how many people are supposed to be in it.

I looked it up once. I don't remember what I found.

The house keeps the feeling regardless.

I am not fine.

I want to note that, for the record, since most of these entries suggest a person who is broadly managing.

I am managing.

That is not the same thing.

Instructions for the day after a better day:

Do not expect it to continue.

This is not pessimism.

It is weather awareness.

Better days are not promises. They are visits.

Be polite.

Let them leave when they leave.

Do not stand at the window shouting after them.

Instructions for if the silence starts making suggestions:

Thank it for its input.

Do not act immediately.

Silence is useful, but it has no qualifications.

Ask the kettle.

Ask the window.

Ask whether you have eaten.

Most emergencies become less philosophical after toast.

I followed my own instructions today.

They did not work.

I would like to speak to whoever wrote them.

Instructions for if someone asks how you are:

Say fine.

Not because you are fine, necessarily. But because fine is a door that opens onto further conversation if the person wants it, and closes cleanly if they don't.

It is a generous word.

It asks nothing of them and costs nothing of you.

If they push, if they sit down and look at you with the particular expression of someone who has time and means it, then you can say something closer to the truth.

You will know the difference.

Instructions for if you cannot tell whether you are lonely:

Check what you have been explaining things to.

Plants count.

Appliances count.

The house counts, but only if you have started pausing afterwards as if waiting for it to answer.

If the answer is yes, make something warm.

This will not solve it.

It will give your hands a job while the rest of you catches up.

I looked for something I didn't find.

I can't remember now what it was.

At the time it seemed important enough to check the obvious places, then the less obvious ones, then the drawer that has never contained anything I've looked for but which I keep trying anyway.

By the time I stopped, I had forgotten what I was after.

This happens more than it used to.

It is probably fine.

The heating came on by itself in the night.

I don't remember setting it. But there it was. The tick and shift of the pipes, the slow warming of the hallway, the particular smell of dust burning off the radiator that only happens at the start of a season.

I lay there and let it run.

Outside, the temperature had done something it was going to have to keep doing for several months now, and the house had noticed before I did, and made adjustments accordingly.

I find this reassuring in a way I can't fully account for.

The house is not sentient.

But it is paying attention.

I sat on the bed today.

Not in it.

On it.

There is a difference, and the difference seemed important enough to respect.

The chair watched from across the room.

I did not apologise.

Addendum:

Do not become loyal to a method that has stopped helping.

Survival is not tradition.

If the chair becomes a trap, leave the chair.

If the bed becomes possible, use the bed.

If the soup is gone, make something else.

Slept in the bed last night.

All night.

I have been eating at different times.

Not randomly. Just differently. Hunger arrives when it arrives now, rather than at the times I previously designated for it.

I ate breakfast at eleven this morning. Lunch did not occur.

At some point in the late afternoon I had an apple and then later, without deciding to, I made eggs and ate them standing at the counter watching the last of the light leave the garden.

It was fine.

Better than fine.

I think I had been eating on a schedule designed for a person with places to be, and I kept the schedule long after the places stopped being necessary.

The eggs were good.

Ate standing at the counter again.

I keep meaning to sit at the table.

The table is right there.

Instructions for soup:

Use the tinned tomatoes.

You have been saving them for something. There is no something. There is only the soup you haven't made yet and the tomatoes that have been waiting since before any of this.

They will not improve with more time.

Neither will you, particularly, but that's a longer conversation.

Use the tomatoes.

Make the soup.

Eat it over two days or four days or standing at the counter at an hour that isn't a mealtime.

It doesn't matter.

The soup is not the point.

I forgot to be quiet for a few hours.

Not loudly. I wasn't making noise.

I just stopped moving carefully through the house, the way you do when you're trying not to disturb something.

I'm not sure what I thought I was disturbing.

Whatever it was, it seems to have managed without my consideration.

The sky has been doing something all week that I don't have the vocabulary for.

Not dramatic. Not the kind of sky that demands attention.

Just a particular quality of light that arrives in the late afternoon and stays longer than it should, making the street look like a photograph of itself taken on a day when everything was slightly better.

I keep stopping to look at it.

I keep not knowing what to do with it after.

Instructions for if the stars seem closer:

They are not closer.

But the thing that was between you and them has thinned.

This happens when enough other things stop.

You can look at them now the way you couldn't before,
without the light from everything else making them seem
further away than they were.

They were always this close.

The birds came back.

I don't know where they went.

I didn't ask.

When something returns after an absence you didn't expect, the correct response is to say nothing and let it land and not make it strange by needing to understand it.

The birds seemed to understand this already.

They usually do.

Instructions for washing when you do not feel attached to your body:

Begin with the hands.

Hands are practical.

They have fewer opinions than faces.

Wash them slowly.

Let the water prove where you end.

Continue only if the evidence is acceptable.

The bin bag tore on the way to the door.

Not badly.

Just enough to make a point.

I stood in the hallway holding it away from my leg while something wet considered escape.

There are days when the world ends in stages.

Today it ended slightly, near the skirting board.

I cleaned it up.

I ate at the table today.

It was not as formal as I had feared.

Despite everything, the pigeons seem to be coping well.

Instructions for if you wake before the light:

Do not ask why.

The body keeps its own minutes.

Lie still if lying still is possible.

If it is not, get up quietly.

This is still good practice, even now.

I stood on the front step longer than usual.

Long enough for the house behind me to become one thing
and the street ahead to become another.

I was between them.

This felt accurate.

My face looked unfamiliar in the bathroom mirror.

Not strange.

Just not expecting me.

I nodded.

It did not nod first.

This felt important.

Instructions for if you see a fox in the road:

Do not call it beautiful.

It knows.

Do not call it lonely.

That is yours.

Let it cross.

Some creatures are only passing through and should not be recruited into your weather.

You may not remember writing these instructions.

That is not unusual.

Quiet rearranges time.

If the house feels unfamiliar, open a window.

If the sky feels closer, let it.

If there are tomatoes, use them.

Leave this where you found it.

Someone will find it too.

Even if that someone is you.

Author's note

Thank you for reading *A User's Guide to Surviving the Quiet*.

If it found you at the right time, or if you think it might find someone else at the right time, pass it on. It's free.

Marcin Wojdyna

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