

The Sill

Laten Cecil

Contents

1. The Free World..... 3

2. The One Who Wants Nothing..... 6

3. The One They Turn Toward..... 8

4. The Reaching 11

1. The Free World

The sun comes to me first, before it reaches the floor. It finds the edge of a leaf and lays itself along it, and I open to it the only way I can, which is to be warm, and to be glad. This is the best part of any day. The light is a hand that never quite comes down to touch, and I hold still under it and take what it gives.

I lean. I am always leaning, a little, toward the glass. It is too slow to see. It happens the way the day happens, and by the time the sun has crossed to the middle of me I have turned a hair further toward the window without ever deciding to.

Water is still in me from yesterday, cool and low at the roots. That is good too. Most mornings are made of small good things like that, if you are still enough to notice them, and I am nothing if not still.

To my left the cactus sits and does not move. It never moves. To my right the tall one stands with its bud shut, keeping its color to itself. I am the plain one, in the middle. I don't mind it, this morning. This morning there is sun.

Someone crosses the room. I feel them before the light shifts, a soft knock coming up through the pot, a warmth that passes and is gone. They make their sounds at me, or near me, the up-and-down music I have heard my whole life and never once understood. I like it anyway. Then the cool comes down all at once, water to the root of me, more than I knew I wanted. I drink. I cannot say thank you. I have never once been able to say thank you. I take what I am given, and I turn, the way I always turn, back to the light at the glass.

Out there, the world will not hold still.

A mover goes down the street, bright and loud and gone before I have finished seeing it. A bird drops past the glass and catches itself and lifts. A person walks by with somewhere to be. People always have somewhere to be. The ease of it, the plain ease of going, is the thing I watch the longest.

And past them, the big ones. The wild plants, and the trees. They are made like me. They are rooted like me, they can no more pull themselves up and walk than I can, and still they look free. The wind gets into them and they give themselves to it. The rain finds them and no one has to carry it. They grow every way at once, up and out and over each other, enormous and greedy and glad, and no one turns them toward the light, because they are already standing in the whole of it.

So I sort the world, the same as every day. Out there, the movers, free. In here, the stayers, kept. And then, the way I always come around to it, I come around to me. I am a stayer. I cannot move. I can only watch.

I don't know why I am a plant. That is the plain shape of it, under all the rest. I don't know why I was made to sit still behind the glass and watch the going of things that get to go.

Down at the tip of me a new leaf is coming. It is small, and pale, and curled, and it is pointed at the window. It is reaching.

2. The One Who Wants Nothing

The grey days give me nothing to drink and nowhere to look but sideways.

No sun comes. The light that reaches me is flat and cool and even. It makes no shadows. The room is quiet. Whoever lives here has gone out, or gone still behind a shut door, and no warmth moves through the floor, and no knock comes up through the pot. On a grey day there is only me, and the one beside me.

So I look at the cactus. On the empty days there is little else, and it gives me nothing back.

It does not lean. I lean all day without meaning to, and it does not lean at all. It does not turn to the window. It does not seem to want the grey light, or to mind that the sun has not come. It sits, spined and shut, wanting nothing, needing so little that whole days pass and no hand comes for it, and it does not appear to notice, or to care.

At first this only bores me. A neighbor with no weather in it.

And then comes the older thing, the one I have no name for. Because the cactus is a stayer, the same as me. It is rooted, the same as me. It cannot go any more than I can go. And still it does not seem to mind. And I cannot tell, however long I look, which it is. Whether that is peace. Some quiet the cactus was given that I was not. Or whether it is only empty. A stayer that wanted things once and does not anymore, with nothing left in it now but the standing.

I do not know which would be worse.

And I do not know, either, if that is where I am going. If a stayer, kept long enough behind the glass, wears down to that in the end. If the wanting is a thing you lose the way the light goes on a grey day, slow, and even, until you cannot remember it was ever warm. Maybe the cactus is what is left of a plant that asked why for too long.

The grey gives me no answer. Grey light never does.

But down at the tip of me the new leaf has moved. Not much. A grey day's worth. It has pushed on a little toward the window even now, even without the sun to pull it, and I hold onto that.

3. The One They Turn Toward

The grey breaks, and the warmth comes back into the room, and the tall one opens.

It has been building to this for days, the bud swelling and going red at the top of the stem, and now it is a flower, all at once, wide and bright and lifted, redder at the heart of it than at the edges. It is beautiful. The light comes through its petals and it holds that light the way I have always wanted to, easily, without trying. I look at it and I am glad to be looking. There is not much on the sill worth seeing. The flower is worth seeing. I would not close it if I could.

But the room comes home, and the room turns toward it.

The warmth and the tremor of the household come up through the pot, and then they are here, and they go to the flower. They lean in close. They touch it, careful, the way a thing gets touched when someone is proud of it. Their sounds go soft and high, the music I never learn the words to, but I know the shape of this music. It is the shape they make at the flower. They turn its face a little toward the light, so it can be seen better, so they can see it better, and they stand there and look.

They do not turn me. I am already facing the light. I turned myself, over days, a hair at a time, and no one saw me do it, and no one ever will.

I am the plain one. I have always known this, the way you know the color you are. Green, and low, and ordinary, sat between the closed thing and the glorious one, and on most days I do not think about it. Today I think about it. Today the hands are in the room and they are not for me, and the old plain question comes up in me, quiet. If that is how a thing gets loved, and I am not made like that, then is there any worth in how I am made at all?

The hands come to me too, on their way out. Water at the root of me, cool and quick. I drink, and I am grateful, and I know the difference between the water they give me and the time they give the flower. The water is a chore. The flower is a joy. I have known that difference my whole life, and it has never once stopped the water from being good.

Out past the glass the wild plants stand in the evening, tall and unkept and green, and no hand has ever come for them. They do not seem to have missed it. They are loved by no one, and free of everyone, and I cannot make those two things sit together in my head. I look at them a long while. The sums do not come out.

Then the house goes quiet. The lights go off, and the warmth thins out of the room, and the flower folds itself

shut for the night and stops being looked at. I am still here. Plain, and awake in the dark, and the new leaf at the tip of me has reached almost to the glass. Almost.

4. The Reaching

The gold comes back in the morning, and I am tired.

I have spent days looking at the two beside me. The cactus that wants nothing, and the flower that is wanted, and me in the middle, wanting and unwanted. I measured myself against the both of them, and I came up wrong twice. Too full of wanting to be the cactus. Too plain to be the flower. So this morning I stop looking sideways. I look out.

The wild plants are there in the gold, big and unkept and green, tossing where the wind gets into them. I have looked at them my whole life and called them the free ones, the ones the rules do not touch. This morning I look longer, and something in me will not settle. One of them, the biggest, has grown up crooked around something long in its way, some post or stone I cannot see, and gone on growing anyway, huge and lopsided and sure of itself, and no one ever came to straighten it or to tell it how.

Because they cannot move. I have always known it and never once let it land. They are rooted, every one of them, sunk into the ground the same way I am sunk into my

pot. They cannot pull up and walk to a better yard. They cannot go anywhere at all. And there is still not one thing in them that looks kept, or shut in, or sorry for itself.

I have spent a whole life asking why I am a plant and not free, as though the two could not both be true. As though free meant going. But the wild things are not free because they can leave. They cannot leave. They are free because they are all the way themselves, out in the whole of the weather, taking the rain that finds them, growing every way a green thing can grow, wanting for nothing they are not already standing inside of.

And I go very still.

Because that is mine too. That has always been mine.

Down at the tip of me, the new leaf has come the last of the way in the night. It is at the glass. It is touching the glass.

I feel it the way I feel everything, slow and sure and from the inside. The glass is cool. It is flat, and it is smooth, and it does not give. The leaf lies along it, small and new and green against all that cold clear nothing, and holds there, and waits.

This is the place I was afraid of. I have been afraid of it my whole life, folded up small and waiting: the end of the reaching, the cold flat stop of the window, the proof that I am kept and the going world is not for me. I braced for it

every day without knowing that I braced. I thought the day the leaf reached the glass would be the day the reaching ran out of anywhere to go.

But the leaf is against the glass, and no grief comes.

I made this. With no hands, and no help, and nowhere to get to, I made it, a hair at a time, between one watering and the next, across all the grey days and the gold ones, and it laid a pale new leaf against the light at the end of a whole long season of pulling. The glass does not open. The glass was never going to open.

The sun crosses and comes to rest where the leaf meets the window, and it warms the leaf, and it warms me.

Behind me the flower opens for its day, and the cactus sits shut in its own long quiet, and I am glad of them both now, and I am neither of them.

I am still lonely. That does not leave. But the morning is gold, and the leaf is warm against the glass, and I am reaching even now, the way I will go on reaching, and for the first time in a long life of looking out, I am not looking out for the thing I am missing. I am only looking. I am here, in the light, being the thing I am.

And I am, it turns out, and it surprises me to feel it, mostly happy.

Thank you for reading.

More free stories by Laten Cecil at latencecil.com.