

A black and white, symmetrical, high-contrast image of a man's face, possibly a portrait of a historical figure, with the word "Stillwater." overlaid in a stylized font. The image is mirrored vertically, creating a symmetrical effect. The man's eyes are closed, and his expression is neutral. The lighting is dramatic, with deep shadows and bright highlights, giving it a grainy, vintage appearance. The text "Stillwater." is centered horizontally and vertically, rendered in a white, gothic-style font with a black outline.

Stillwater.

“...the sufferer should never know the intensity of what he endures by its present torture, but chiefly by the pang that rankles after it.”
– Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlett Letter*

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“How can so much grace be contained in one, small package?”

I had read that, somewhere, yet seeing Her brought the realization that neither I, nor the author of the line, had truly appreciated the precision in which he had captured such an elusive, emotional response to beauty; He had, perhaps unwittingly, written something almost like gospel.

With the gravitas and still majesty usually found only in stoic art-pieces and calm, uninhibited countryside, she stood oddly still, and she had about her a beauty so stark, so breath-taking, that, for a moment, I could not help but to stare, and pause, caught in her allure.

A bright, red ribbon tied her ghostly pale-blonde hair behind her in a neat ponytail, allowing the sun the pleasure of her features. Her face was a blur masked by the radiance of the sun, and yet brightened by the shimmers of light adorning her curls. She seemed to radiate the light herself, to command it, even.

A pair of stark, red boots, of leather I suppose, were upon her feet, but on her person, on the smooth pliancy of her shoulders, was a dress that seemed to have a life of its own, that looked as if it could slip away at any moment, stirring at the slightest hint of the wind. Cream colored, it billowed and engulfed her figure, a part of her entirely.

Am I seeing an angel?

In that moment, I felt as if I had intruded upon something sacred, a moment not meant to be seen by eyes like mine.

And then suddenly, reluctantly, the knowledge of where I was came to me unbidden, as it always does in dreams, and the image before me began to dissolve into nonsensical light, emotion, and sound.

This single moment of euphoric sensation, of a chance-encounter with a stranger whose beauty I was unable to ignore, was simply a projection of subconscious yearnings, and failures.

I remembered that in this moment I fought to speak, pushed past the stumblings of my tongue in the urge to say something, anything, that would allow me to become a part of Her world, even if for a moment.

And, I remember that I had said the wrong thing.

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It was by the light of the moon that I awoke, splayed, an attempt at rest once again unsuccessful. The previous darkness in which I had shrouded myself in the pursuit of a peaceful rest was no more, and now, I

lay exposed in the unabashed moonlight. To be awoken at such an apparent late hour was not uncommon, quite the opposite in fact, but it was the glare of the moon that shone insistent upon my person that had brought me back to horrible reality. Sleep came to me as the only reprieve from the pressures surrounding my thoughts, and of the pain hampering my heart. The smell of my own breath served as a reminder of yet another attempt to drown my torments in liquids, deep and treacherous, and to stall any thoughts of rising from my present, inert condition.

Stagnant, unable to move beneath the oppressive weight of thought, my limbs ached with the pains of disuse; my mind not yet recovered from its latest excursion into the subconscious.

Tired. So dreadfully tired, but the grievances within originated not from strenuous labor, nor from any kind of physical exertion. I lay, dying, of heartbreak.

The abhorrent state in which I found myself had persisted since the day my love had gone, left me, and taken with her the essence of my will. Surprisingly, it was not the complete loss of the only woman to ever keep my inhibitions at bay that left me immobile, and still, it was the knowledge that she had been able to move on, to put behind her so much of our history, so many of our promises, and go on to undoubtedly better.

I harbored no ill-emotion toward her; I had, since its frail inception, known that the tortures of my psyche would ultimately undo the love she bade me, the love she gave without thought of reward.

I wished her well, no one should have had to suffer me as she did.

Buried beneath a plethora of sheets, whose weight served as an even greater deterrent to rise than that of the depression weighing upon me, I, with great effort, pushed aside the thoughts of her, and of the past. It was sickening, the way the emotions sat in the stomach. My mind was a nasty stew of regret. How had it all gotten away, how had I not known, in those precious, now intangible moments, that they would one-day be gone? That she, would one day be gone?

The pain again became too much for the conscious mind to bear, and I was reminded again, as I shut my eyes in hopes to again relieve the burden brought upon by potent, distressed awareness, of the insistent light in which the moon saw fit to bathe me; its bright, white, luminescence. From my view as I lay still in bed, only the Old Church that sat atop a mighty hill some distance away from my estate, was visible to me through the window, the Old Church, and the full moon.

Around the church, trees grew in a half-moon outline, encompassing the rear of the building, yet never seeming to intrude upon its space, allowing it to remain ever visible, and ever-present. Its windows were like pupil-less eyes, watching, observing, filled with the pale light of the moon.

As I lay there, I for a time wondered at the old structure, so far away and yet still so remarkable in its silhouette against the pallid light of the moon, and the vast canvas of night-sky and stars.

“The Old Church”, named such for its apparent age, but also for its unknown, enigmatic past. No sign lay tell of its original name, nor was there any indication of the church’s origin found within the building itself, which inside houses still the seats of those who had once come for salvation, and the mighty pew from which they received it. It is said, by the townspeople, that the old church was here long before even the first of the settlers had come, times long past, and long forgotten, and it had remained ever-since as a monument to another age and another history forever forgotten; but here, martyred, and left behind.

What grand stories must those walls hold within their aged wood-beams, what secrets they must house in perpetual, stoic silence.

Prying my eyes from the antique monolith, and beginning to rise, I mustered what little strength available to and brushed aside the comforts of the bedding, the cool sensation of the hardwood floor beneath my bare feet an odd, yet comforting sensation. The window in which the moonlight spilled into my bedroom was to the right of the bed, and I made the short distance toward it, intending to shut the great, black curtains and return to the solemn peace of darkness.

Upon my property was a pond, a minute body of water home to very little in the ways of life, and, it sat some distance away from the manor, surrounded almost entirely by trees and overgrowth; but, as I stood at the window, my eyes fell upon a most peculiar sight.

A woman, standing atop the pond’s waters.

The window allowed for such a view of the pond in its near entirety when faced at standing height, obscured only by sparse, bare branches that, *tapped, tapped, tapped*, as the wind outside brought motion to their usual inanimacy. But they did not obscure the sight of her.

She stood, tall, unusually tall, yes, for even from the distance of the house to the pond, which was some three-hundred or more odd feet, her magnificent height was apparent. Atop the waters, she made a slow, ponderous pace across its surface, a figure of mysterious horror and grace.

Slowly, rational thought began to make its way back into the mind, the alarm of seeing a trespasser at this late hour, and such an unusual one at that, brought me forth from my previous mental stupor. A singular thought invaded my mind.

Am I seeing a ghost?

How long I stood there I could not say, though gradually, the reaction of fear and anger, gave way to something, peculiar. My focus upon her became less, and less... forced. So far away, the specifics of her features

were impossible to make, yet she stood stark against the night, her white apparel seeming to glow.

And how she did glow in the moonlight.

The branches along the window continued to *tap, tap, tap*, and as I stared, beginning to feel an odd, yet familiar sensation rise into my chest, she was gone, the swish of a branch across the windowpane taking her away in an instant.

Astounded, the initial feeling of terror was then long past and had been replaced by a maddening wonder.

Just **what** had I seen? Was it some curious trickery cast by the moon's ghostly presence, playing upon the uncertainty of an unquiet mind; or, was the truth something far more terrifying, something I until then had thought completely improbable?

I stood for some length at the window, staring, pondering this, until ultimately retreating back to the comforts of my bed, finally shutting the great black curtains, and drowning my surroundings again in darkness.

I lay there for some time until the implacable wave of exhaustion again washed from me present consciousness, and brought blessed, comatic sleep.

When I dreamt again, it was of a woman clad in virgin promise, alone surrounded by those she loved, but never the one who loved her.

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It was by the light of the full moon and in those precious hours long before morning that she again revealed herself to me, a drift atop the cold, calm waters of the pond. The evening's fog lay over the waters in a thin, translucent blanket that rolled and, washed as the wind made play of it.

I watched in secret, having been taken by a furious curiosity; I had come down to the pond every night since my initial sighting of Her, and had waited those long nights in vain; but now, she was before me once more, and I felt as I stood there, enraptured by the sight of Her, a feeling of muddled, immense sorrow rise within me.

Tall, and petite in frame, she had about her a grace, and regality privy only to those belonging to the feminine sex, a natural air of such magnificence unconscious to her, yes, but in truth an inescapable, undeniable force of attraction.

Spectral, she glistened and glittered, as if the drops of dew and water upon her porcelain skin were instead diamonds, and stars, alight with the radiance of the moon.

As she moved, silent and serene across the water's surface, behind her came the stark-white length of her dress, the waters left their impression upon the cloth, yes, yet as she glided it remained undisturbed, by that of waves or wind or movement.

Nor did the sounds of evening penetrate the sanctity of night, she brought with her the silence of the grave, her presence commanding praise achievable only through quiet appreciation.

The trees above whispered, yet theirs was the only minute sound that dared trespass upon a moment such as this.

The black of her long, straight hair lay in stark contrast to her snow-white dress, refusing the light offered by the moon, and here, so close, I then saw that she wore a wedding-gown, yet her face remained unveiled.

It came to me suddenly just what had been disturbing my thoughts.

This woman before me, so blameless, so lovely, was dead, and I, seeing only an apparition, a ghost, a reflection.

I could not fathom by what unfair cruelty could she have met her fate, it was unthinkable, what harm could anyone desire to bring a woman such as that? Why did she reside then within those lonely waters and not upon a mighty hill, or deep valley, open to the sun, and the warmth, and the energy of life that she undoubtedly spread in every action, every word?

She continued on, moving across the waters with the same ease and slow grace as the fog that which lay over it, and I allowed myself to feel for this unknown woman, this lady of the pond, as I had never felt for anyone before; here, before me was the naked face of tragedy, untimely death, come to a young woman with so much life yet to give.

I began to leave, in slow retreat, but as I turned my head to go, she turned to face me, and I found myself at a loss of words at the face before me.

Indescribable, all words fell flat in the attempt to bring any kind of description to the splendor before my eyes. The architecture of her features held no flaw, every line, every curve, of nose, or lip, or jaw, had been crafted with the utmost care, developed with an unmatched artistry.

Her gaze, held mine, and as I lost myself in the dark, infinite maze of her eyes I realized that I would never again be able to find my way out, nor did I want to.

I began to go to her, drawn by a force I was unaware of and unable to deny, whether it was by Her I cannot say, but even as I felt the cold, harsh waters of the pond begin to creep upon my feet, and then upon the entirety of my abdomen, I slowed not in my pursuit. My eyes never at once leaving Hers.

The freezing embrace of the waters as they encompassed me entirely shocked my body into inanimacy, my muscles protesting and contracting in an agony so absolute in its insistence that all thoughts of the ghostly woman evaporated from my mind, replaced by a sense of frantic alarm that began to slow as the blood within grew cold. My lungs filled with glacial intensity, yet burned with a fire I could not understand, or extinguish. My words left me in inaudible gurgles, and I watched as they floated away in hurried escape. The grip of the waters held me still, and I felt no longer pain, or even the cold. Porcelain hands cupped my face, and I was brought back a moment from an endless unconsciousness to the face of the one who had brought me to those unforgiving depths.

And as she held me, I saw an image of a woman, standing alone at an altar, I saw her wait, until the day became night, for a man who would never come, I saw her run, as fast as she could, away from the church, away from the pain that had begun cementing itself within her heart, and I saw her drown in waters deep and unforgiving, but not nearly so unforgiving as a broken heart.

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About the Author -

The author, James Q. Smith was born October 2nd, 1999, in Conyers, Georgia in the United States, and was an avid reader for long as he can remember. Always involved in the arts Smith spent most of his childhood, and adolescence, primarily sketching, and animating in his spare time, never quite venturing into writing but always enraptured by the thought of authoring a novel.

In college, he began to pursue a career in writing, and poetry, and would eventually write, "Stillwater", a short story verging on prose-poem that would serve as an introduction into the world of writing, as well as cathartic relief.

Currently, as of this story's creation, he is attending college at Georgia Gwinnett College, pursuing a degree in writing, for the stage and screen.

