

Name: _____

Class: _____

Quiet Town

By Jason Gurley
2015

Fantasy and science fiction writer Jason Gurley is known for his novels set in the Silo universe, as well as the fantasy novel Eleanor. In this story, Gurley imagines life in an American coastal town in the very near future. As you read, take notes on how the author builds tension in the story.

- [1] She was in the laundry room, bent over a basket of Benjamin's muddy trousers and grass-stained T-shirts and particularly odorous socks, when a rap sounded on the screen door. She didn't hear at first; she'd noticed, bent over there, a cluster of webbed, purplish veins just below her thigh, beside her knee. She didn't like seeing them there. They were like a slow-moving car wreck, those veins, a little darker, a little more severe each time she looked. They bothered her.



The front porch creaked, and the screen door rattled on its hinges as the knock came again.

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Bev eased up to standing, still clutching a mound of laundry against her middle. She pinned the clothes with one hand, and with the other, looped the hair out of her eyes.

"Yeah?" she called over her shoulder.

- [5] "Me," the answer came.

Bev took in a long breath, let it fill up her lungs and raise her voice to a tone one might reasonably mistake for pleasant.

"Come on in, Ezze," she hollered. "Coffee cake on the table, you want some."

The screen door complained a bit, and not for the first time Bev made a mental note to oil the d— thing. But she knew she'd forget between now and the next time Ezze hobbled over. The door banged shut, followed by the scuff of the dining chair being pulled out, the expulsion of breath as Ezze dropped, too heavily, onto it. The chair wouldn't take such abuse forever. Bev sometimes wished it would give out, and then felt guilty for thinking such things. Beneath her gravel and bluster, Ezze was just lonely.

Bev stuffed the clothes into the wash and spun the old machine up. It rocked agreeably, knocking with a small clatter into the dryer beside it. Bev leaned against the wall, just for a second, just to take a few breaths before going in to the kitchen. The back door was open, its own screen door shut. Gray light spilled through the window, leaked through the uneven gaps in the doorjamb. She could see the pale, lumbering clouds that scraped the tops of the houses around hers. Most of those houses were empty now.

[10] Just me and Benji, Bev thought.

From the kitchen, a smacking sound, the clink of a serving knife against the platter.

Just me and Benji and Ezze, Bev corrected.

She didn't like the wind out there today. The Aparicios had left laundry on the line when they moved out — in a hurry, like everybody these past few weeks — and almost all of it was scattered around the neighborhood now, T-shirts and pantyhose and thermal underwear caught up in bare tree branches, soaked and plastered in gutters. Almost all of it, except for the heavy quilt, heavier now from all the rain, that dragged the laundry line low. The wind caught even that, lifted it nearly horizontal, a cheerful, soggy flag.

"A bit dry, dear," came Ezze's voice.

[15] Bev turned away from the screen door. Cold air breathed around it, pushing through the gaps, and Bev shivered. But she left the inner door open for Benjamin, and went into the kitchen.

"How's the hip?" Bev asked, ignoring Ezze's comment.

Ezze groaned theatrically. "I'd give anything for a new one," she said. "But who's got money for that?"

Her gray cane rested against the table beside her, tipped up on two of its four stubby feet. The rubber nubs on the end of each were damp and clumped with gray earth and grit. Bev sighed and picked up the cane and carried it onto the porch. Ezze didn't say anything. Bev cranked the spigot¹ attached to the house. It choked and sputtered, coughing up a weak stream. Bev rinsed the cane, then propped it against the house, and went back inside.

Ezze regarded her irritably as Bev spritzed a paper towel with Windex, then wiped up the mud the cane had left behind.

[20] "That's for windows, dear," Ezze said, watching Bev from beneath her glasses.

Bev didn't say anything, just balled up the towel and dropped it into the wastebasket. The plastic lid swung twice, stopped.

"That's why it's called Windex," Ezze went on. "Windows. Windex." She wrinkled her slug of a nose and squinted up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "Don't know where the ex part came from, though."

Bev went into the kitchen, her hands searching for tasks. Perhaps if she appeared to be busy, Ezze would leave. But the countertops were tidy, the sink free of dishes.

"Your linoleum's² soft," Ezze said. Bev looked up to see the woman bouncing lightly in the chair. Below her, the

1. a faucet

2. a type of floor covering

linoleum bowed. "It's cheap stuff. I've got the same in my place."

[25] "Well, stop making it worse," Bev said.

Ezze laughed as if this was funny. "You should see mine," she said. "Sagging all over the place."

I wonder why, Bev thought but did not say.

Ezze took another bite of coffee cake, then made a show of gagging on crumbs. "Water," she croaked, putting one damp hand to the loose skin around her throat. "Water."

Bev filled a glass from the tap, then put it down in front of Ezze, who stared at it in horror, her stage act forgotten.

[30] "Dear," Ezze said. "You're not drinking it, are you? There's a warning. It's all over the TV."

"We don't have a TV," Bev said flatly. "What warning?"

"Contaminated supply or something. I don't know." Ezze waved her hand about. "Real problem is what I came over to tell you about, though. You're not going to believe it."

Bev took the glass of water away from Ezze, crossed back into the kitchen and dumped it aggressively into the sink. Then the fight faded from her, just as quickly as it seemed to have risen up. Ezze didn't mean any harm, she reminded herself again. She was old; she was alone. It wasn't her fault, none of it. Can't fight age. Can't make people stay.

"What's that?" Bev asked, brushing her hair back again. "Believe what?"

[35] The back screen door banged open then, and Benji clattered into the kitchen like a runaway shopping cart. He was out of breath, his pants rolled up to his knees. He held his tennis shoes in one hand, but whatever he'd gotten into, he'd taken them off too late. They were caked with gray mud, and his legs were splashed with it.

Ezze looked at Benji, who gasped like a fish, trying to get some words out.

"He knows," Ezze said. "Don't you, boy."

Bev looked wide-eyed at Ezze, then back at Benjamin. "Knows what? Benjamin, you're filth —"

Benjamin shook his head and held up a hand, working on just breathing.

[40] "Oh, fine," Ezze said. "I'll tell her."

"Tell me what?" Bev asked. "What the h— is going on?"

Benjamin, cheeks strawberry-colored against his pale skin, said, "Water — water —"

Bev turned to fill her glass again, but Benji lurched forward and grabbed her hand.

"No," he said, chest heaving. "Water's — the water —"

[45] "Oh, for Pete's sake," Ezze said. "The water's here, Bev."

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What was it Gordy had said?

"When ice melts, the glass don't spill over."

Bev had leaned against him in the porch swing, comforted by his disbelief, while he told her about a column he read when they were in college, by that brainy woman who answered people's letters. Someone wrote in and asked the woman if you were to fill a glass with ice cubes, then run tap water right up to the rim of the glass, what would happen when the ice melted? And the brainy woman said something about melting ice cubes displacing the same amount of water as the frozen ice.

It's not my fault, Bev thought now. It's his fault, not mine. His. She wasn't the fool. It was him. He was.

[50] But that wasn't fair. Gordy hadn't taken the news seriously, but at the time, nobody had. They'd been on the porch, listening to the radio while the neighborhood noisily settled in for the night. Benjamin had been scrambling around in the front yard, kicking dried-out pinecones around like footballs.

"You remember the oddest things," Bev had said, and Gordy had laughed. There had been plenty of laughter in those days. Those days, that's how Bev thought of them. As in: those days when life was good. Those days when there were still people around. When the sun blazed and they called it a nice summer day, not an ice-melter like everyone did now. Those days. When Gordy was still around.

But Gordy had been wrong. The brainy woman had been wrong. The radio warning all those years ago, when Benji was small, had been wrong. Fifty years, they'd said. In fifty years, the coastlines will be different. Your homes will be underwater. Fifty years.

They'd listened to the talk shows afterward, the pundits arguing that nobody knew what the next ten years would look like, much less the next fifty. It's all a farce,³ they argued. It's a campaign strategy. A ploy.⁴ Fifty years — ha!

It had happened in five.

[55] Gordy went and died before it got serious, and on summer evenings, when the skies went purple and orange, Bev and Benjamin and sometimes Ezze, even, would wander down to the sea wall⁵ with the rest of the town, and they'd all stand on the wall and look down at the water level. When they couldn't see the high-water mark, somebody would motor out in a rubber boat and spray a new line of paint on the wall.

3. **Farce** (*noun*) a ridiculous event

4. **Ploy** (*noun*) a tricky plan

5. a thick wall that blocks the ocean from coming onto land

Soon enough, someone could just lean over the rail and spray that new line. The water kept rising. When it was a few inches from the top of the wall, people started leaving town. In a month's time, the village had emptied.

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Ezze scooped up her cane and went heavily down the porch steps. Benji tugged on Bev's hand. He held it tightly as they walked, following the older woman as she puffed along. Bev barely registered his grip until it was too tight, and she yelped.

"Sorry, Mama," he said.

She saw Gordy in Benji's eyes. They weren't a child's eyes anymore. Benji was nearly thirteen, and already his eyes were narrow slots. He and Gordy both had a Clint Eastwood squint, and she could see the boy's jawline, his cheekbones, sharpening. His hair was already drawing back on his head, though. She didn't dare break his heart by telling him now, but he'd lose most of it by twenty, probably, just like his father.

[60] The thought that he might not see twenty was a block of ice in her gut.

"I knowed about it when Pippa came home with a crabshell in her mouth," Ezze said, huffing as she waddled ahead. "Came right on home with it. No place else she could've gotten it. Had to have washed up over the wall. Fresh, too. She'd pulled half the meat out, but I swear the thing was still twitching."

The street was gritty under their feet. Bev padded along in her flip-flops, and as Ezze fell silent, Bev's shoes pock-pocked like tennis balls. There was a sound she hadn't heard in a long time.

Used to be a court down by the high school, and on quiet days, you could hear the distant sound of rackets pocking the balls, back and forth, back and forth. The sharp shriek of tennis shoes on the clay, too. People grunting and shouting excitedly.

Quiet town.

[65] "I saw your Rascal,"⁶ Benji said. "I tried to fix it, but..."

He trailed off.

"Your Rascal?" Bev asked.

Ezze stopped for a moment, breathing heavily. "Yeah," she admitted, bending over a bit, leaning on the cane. "I rode down there on it with Pippa to see for myself. Battery died right up at the wall. There were some boys putting down sandbags, and they tried to help me with it, but it's just dead. One of them walked me back home. Nice kid. I don't know whose kid. Not many left, you know."

Benji said, "It's still where you left it. There's some seagull s— on it, but —"

6. a motorized scooter that helps with mobility

[70] "Benjamin Howard Marsh," Bev said sharply.

Benji sighed and muttered, "Yeah, okay. Sorry."

"Never mind that," Ezze said loudly. She pounded the rubber feet of her cane on the concrete. "Look."

They all looked down to see a thin ribbon of water. It cascaded between their feet, and they all watched in a hush as it passed them by, gathering up bits of leaves and fine gravel. The water kept going, making its way down the street until they couldn't quite make out its leading edge. It was here now, Bev thought.

"Oh, Jesus," Ezze cried. She high-stepped around her cane as another rivulet ran through the yellowed grass on the shoulder of the road. And in the quiet then they could hear it: the water, its thousand narrow fingers, creeping through the dead lawns and over the bleached asphalt. They could see it, stream after stream of it moving across empty driveways, splitting around the stop sign post, and then the thousand fingers of it bled together until the water was a blue-gray sheet, rippling along beneath the darkening sky, claiming the land for its own.

[75] "Mama," Benji said.

The water spilled around their feet, thin but here.

"Mama," he said again, tugging Bev's hand. She looked up at him, then at Ezze, whose stern features had folded into a new shape, a softer, more honest mask, a fearful one.

"Mama, we gotta go," Benjamin said.

Such a fool, Bev thought to herself again. What would Gordy have done? But it didn't matter what he would do now. It mattered what he had done then, and what he had done then was laugh, then die.

[80] We should've had a TV, she thought absurdly.

She looked at Ezze. The fading sun caught the faint whiskers on Ezze's cheeks, turning them into tiny glowing filaments. Benji stared at her, his narrow eyes still fierce with hope and promise, his skin rosy where it faced the sunset, and dusky purple on the opposite side, in shadow, as if he was already dead, and there was no way around it.

"Quiet Town" by Jason Gurley. Jason Gurley is the author of Eleanor and Awake in the World. "Quiet Town" first appeared in Lightspeed Magazine, and in the anthology Loosed Upon the World. Used with permission, all rights reserved.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. How do paragraphs 28-32 contribute to the theme?
 - A. They demonstrate how the government has failed to keep the townspeople safe.
 - B. They demonstrate how changes in the environment can present dangers to one's health.
 - C. They demonstrate that strong relationships can develop between neighbors in difficult times.
 - D. They demonstrate that the townspeople are unconcerned with what is happening to the environment.

2. Which detail best supports the idea that Bev had time to take action to save herself and Benji?
 - A. "Most of those houses were empty now. / Just me and Benji, Bev thought." (Paragraphs 9-10)
 - B. "He held his tennis shoes in one hand, but whatever he'd gotten into, he'd taken them off too late. They were caked with gray mud" (Paragraph 35)
 - C. "The radio warning all those years ago, when Benji was small, had been wrong. Fifty years, they'd said." (Paragraph 52)
 - D. "And in the quiet then they could hear it: the water, its thousand narrow fingers, creeping through the dead lawns and over the bleached asphalt." (Paragraph 74)

3. What effect do the phrases "its thousand narrow fingers, creeping" and "claiming the land for its own" produce in the story? (Paragraph 74)
 - A. They emphasize how slowly and gently the water is rising.
 - B. They highlight the similarities between the water and people.
 - C. They emphasize a sense of unease regarding the rising water.
 - D. They create a sense of excitement about the changing landscape.

4. How does the description of Benji's face in paragraph 81 help build tension?
 - A. by drawing a connection between Benji and his father
 - B. by suggesting the unavoidable danger he is in
 - C. by revealing the anger he has for his mother
 - D. by illustrating Benji's conflicting motives

5. You have just read "Quiet Town" by Jason Gurley. How does the flashback in paragraphs 46-54 create tension?

In your response be sure to:

- clarify what is happening at this moment in the story.
- state who is speaking, narrating, or being quoted for each piece of evidence.
- include when or where the action took place, if needed for clarification.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Why do you think Bev did not want to displace her family, despite the warnings about rising sea levels?
2. Explain the author's choice to title the story "Quiet Town." Is this an accurate title for the story? Why or why not?