

Drought

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.” She places her napkin on the table, flashes a half-smile, and slides out of the booth. I move to see her to the door; she raises a hand without looking at me. *Right*. I catch one last time the white band of skin on her ring finger. Her head stays low as she exits the luncheonette. She didn’t see or hear the waitress who called a quick goodbye.

I catch in the fringes of my sight the staff putting up chairs and wiping down tables. I can’t look away from the door yet. I still hear outside the ticking of the sprinkler on the lawn. “Wasn’t expecting there to be a drought this season,” I’d said. Small talk I wish I could take back. Still, we didn’t fight this time. She’d come after all – that was worth something, right? I tell myself that anyway.

She’d looked right at me when she came in. Something behind her eyes...was that light old or new? Did I imagine it? She even managed to laugh a few times. Then someone else laughed – a deep-bellied giggle. I think the baby’s family was in the next booth. I didn’t notice; I withered to see the light recede from her eyes.

I can still hear the sprinkler ticking outside as I finally move my eyes away from the door. The sun passes its triumphant zenith. *Right*. Even the sun sinks. The watered grass sparkles under its light. I seem to see now the earth beneath in its blindness and thirst, reaching feebly up to drink what it may from the fountain above. How deeply does the water run? Could the ground survive without? My mind withdraws from this vision and falls into the dark of the coffee she’d barely touched. Something seems smaller in my mind, as though its walls are creeping in, narrowing my thoughts. Or maybe I’m just seeing things now a bit the way she’s seen things.

Does she know I kept the pink socks? Now that I think about it, I hope she doesn't. My thoughts constrict again as I remember them – little lace edges. I could barely fit one of those socks on my thumb. She'd laughed about it then. Maybe that's why that was the thing I kept. And I had to keep something, even if I couldn't tell her that, then or now.

Did we even really say *anything* today? For the moment, I can't seem to remember a thing. Maybe we just returned to the old dance. I couldn't say anything useful then, and I don't know if I've much improved. What can someone even say about something like that?

“All done?”

I jump a bit, and the waitress jumps too. I think I mumbled an apology. The waitress nods toward the mug; I nod, and she takes it away. My stomach sinks. Has it been five minutes since *she* left through that door, or has it been fifty?

The cicadas buzz outside – I always hated that noise. It makes me think of vultures circling somewhere overhead, waiting for some poor thing to stop its struggle. My stomach knots.

I do remember that I'd managed to say something – “I planted a tree last month.”

She'd looked at me again. Did that light return for a moment? “Oh? Has it sprouted yet?”

“No...they say it takes several weeks to germinate.”

“So it could have died, and you just wouldn't know yet.”

“Yeah...I don't know yet. But I guess it's worth the trying...even if I didn't see this drought coming. Maybe just the thought.”

I don't remember our saying much afterward. I remember she fiddled more with the stem of her mug. She always does that when she's thinking.

I look outside again. They've turned the sprinklers off. I wonder how quickly that ground will dry – did it really do much good? I wonder about those seeds I placed in the ground. Maybe no sprout will come. Dark places with no light and water. Even the sun will disappear, and how long will the darkness follow? I've taken for granted the sun returning. But tomorrow is a distant and heavy word. Will the light struggle to pierce through clouds, failing to extend, tremulous and tentative, even one golden finger of morning? I've heard that in rainy season in the northwest, you can go weeks without seeing the sun. Why am I now afraid for the sun?

“Sir?”

I look up. It's the same waitress as before. She tries to keep a light air as she continues, “I guarantee this place isn't going anywhere. You can always come back. We've just got to be moving for now.”

Did I nod or force a polite laugh? I don't remember. But I realize she's said for me what was coming dully: I need to be *moving*. I gather my things and walk out the door.