

It was still early, but the sun was already a battering ram against the earth. In protest, Ember kept the blinds closed as she measured coffee grounds, moving from shadow to beleaguered shadow. If only these pockets of darkness were a little wider, a little deeper, she would have happily fallen into one and been lost forever. But today would not allow such an easy departure. The light forced its way in, slicing past the shades in hot white ribbons that burned across the kitchen.

She stepped closer to the window and nudged the blind aside, pressing her forehead to the warming glass and contemplating this narrow view of Jerome's garden, curious to see if she could name just one of his plants—but of course she couldn't. This wasn't her domain. The garden had grown riotous and leggy since she'd last looked. And when had that been exactly? A while ago. Months, probably. She remembered sprouts no bigger than a thumbnail, coming up through the freshly turned soil. Now she could barely see the dirt for all the sprawling growth that covered it.

Behind her, the kettle was beginning to hum. Ember hurried to take it off the flame before the whistle could gather itself and call out. She didn't want to wake Jerome,

who was still asleep upstairs, a dream rumbling in the back of his throat, legs tangled in the sheet. They'd had yet another argument the night before and she had neither patience nor desire to repair anything with him just now. Better that she slip out before he came down and they started up all over again. She was beginning to suspect that the fight was unwinnable, no matter how many times they had it. No need to hurry toward a resolution that was always receding. She poured hot water over the grounds and set the kettle back down as gently as she could.

The more pressing concern, in Ember's mind at least, was that the sovereignty of her summer was this very moment coming to an end. The past few months spent laboring over a half-finished manuscript in her attic study, forehead brushing against the sloping wall as she sat in curled concentration, had given her something to hold onto. But now a desolate school year, long and full of needs not her own, yawned.

Existential dread brought on by the start of the academic calendar was certainly not new to her (she'd been teaching for long enough to become well acquainted) but at that moment it felt almost unbearable. Without the long days spent working on her manuscript, there would be nowhere left to escape to—on the one side, the politicking of academia, which she had grown to despise, and on the other, Jerome's constant grievances, which were wearing her down like the course polish of sandpaper.

Running a hand over the back of her neck as if to sweep away the tension that hovered there, she took her coffee and sat, still facing the mostly-covered window and that bright, narrow swathe of Jerome's garden peeking through. She should really meet the day and open the blinds, but she couldn't face the wattage just yet. Instead, she thought of the unfinished manuscript that would soon begin to gather dust, the chafe of

her academic mantle that hung by the door, the frenetic shape of the hours that would follow this one, and felt—not overwhelmed, that wasn't quite right.

The word was *defeated*.

It was the foregone futility of the day that irked her most. The first Monday of the term was always a throwaway. Classes would be spent reminding students which texts they needed and claiming she would try to remember their names, although she never did. Had no intention to. There would be inane small talk and paperwork and at least one reminder from Ya that the laureate committee was watching. She would endure it all, not gracefully exactly, but with the same measure of detached complacency she brought to the rest of her academic responsibilities.

She took her first sip of coffee and immediately burnt her tongue, then swallowed it anyway (what else could she do?) and felt the singe travel down the back of her throat. At least the looseness of discomfort was made tangible now, defined by both taste and texture. She probed the roof of her mouth to find the edges of this new affliction.

Ember was not well-liked at the university. By anyone: students or faculty or administrators. And that was fine. It was her own fault, she recognized that. Her interest had never been teaching and she wasn't able to hide her exasperation with the entire apparatus. For her, academia was only a means to a very particular end. A matter of rallying the power of an institution to her cause. She'd originally intended the job to be a brief interval while she assembled the money and the personnel necessary to pry open a new archeological site. Because that was where she belonged—mid-excavation, dirt in every crease, bent in the service of discovery. The trouble was, this academic interlude of hers was creeping toward a decade now, threatening to become the entirety of her career. It had been eight years since her last dig. And still, no matter how many

proposals she wrote, no matter how many grants she applied for, no matter how much university letterhead she used, the radical new project she had staked the sum of her professional credibility on was somehow no closer to fruition.

*This is the year it all comes together*, she thought, but it was a half-hearted refrain. She'd been telling herself this story for so long it had begun to seem more like a myth than a real possibility. Perhaps the time had come to face the fact that it would never come together. That all of this had been for nothing.

But no, she couldn't bring herself to think that way either.

Turning away from the uncertainty of the near future, she thumbed the thick glaze of her coffee cup and wondered instead what this clumsy piece of pottery might look like in a century. In a millennia. Anything to separate herself from the discomfort of now. It was the adult version of a self-soothing exercise almost as old as she was, though lately its efficacy was beginning to deteriorate.

As a child, she had buried treasures in order to dig them up again: precious stones from her mother's jewelry box, coins from the bowl of change they kept by the front door of her childhood home, spare keys. Each time she did this it was a revelation. She would insert some small piece of her present into the ground and when she returned to it the object would be waiting for her, exactly where she had left it but irrevocably changed by the process. Crusted with dirt, marked by the evidence of however many days or weeks or sometimes years she had allowed it to remain hidden underground. Even after she washed these treasures and returned them to their rightful places, even when no one else could see the difference, she knew the objects had been profoundly altered. It was a thrill she could not explain. The process was proof that history was both

a thing to be found and a thing to be made, and the hubris of this realization marked her early; it stayed with her still.

She was startled by a knock at the door. Roused, she put the cup down and listened, thinking she must have misheard. She wasn't expecting anyone, not at this hour. But she was already halfway out of her seat when the knock came again. She hurried to the foyer, anxious that whomever it was should not knock a third time and wake Jerome after all her careful tiptoeing. She undid the bolt with a thud and the volume made her wince.

"Yes?" she said, speaking quietly but not troubling herself to be polite. There was a young man she'd never seen before standing there, shifting from one foot to the other, with ears so big she didn't even notice his other features. Her eyes dropped down to the envelope in his hands. The post never came this early, nor did it require a knock at the door. She caught the unmistakable scent of saltwater and fish guts, then noticed the sheen of his rubber boots and the grime on the laborer's coveralls he wore. He was from the docks. Understanding stirred.

"You're Ember Agni?" the young man asked.

"I am."

A wave of adrenaline rolled through her as she reached for the envelope. The letter he carried was from Ish. It had to be. Her hand shook. *Finally*, she thought. It had been so long since he left she'd almost stopped expecting to hear from him.

"Brought this over myself. Fella said it was urgent." He paused, turning the envelope over in his hands. Not relinquishing it. "Said payment on delivery."

"How much?" She tried to keep the desperation out of her voice.

He quoted a sum and Ember hurried to rifle through the pockets of the jackets hanging in the foyer. She found the heaviness of Jerome's wallet and all but emptied it.

The man counted the money under his breath, clearly wishing he'd asked for more. "Don't have change."

"It's fine." Ember reached again for the envelope. "Just—"

Sliding the cash into his pocket, he finally yielded his slight cargo with a shrug. As if what he carried didn't matter. She was too dazed to be aggrieved by this carelessness. With the letter finally in her hands, she realized she'd stopped breathing at some point and drew a deep, stuttering inhale.

"You brought it over from where did you say?" she asked, knowing full well he hadn't said. "Which port?" But he was already taking a step back, eager to be done with this errand now that he'd been paid.

"You have a good morning," he said, and with that, clomped back down the steep hill toward the docks, his rubber boots squeaking as he went, taking the dead smells of the sea with him. The envelope all but vibrated in her hands. As soon as he was out of sight, she closed the door as quietly as she could.

In the darkened foyer, Ember contemplated this unassuming bit of paper, momentarily paralyzed by a mixture of dread and excitement stirred together, an overpowering sensation that oozed from the crown of her head, down the length of her body, then hardened, like a soft golden resin becoming solid. Sealed inside this shell of anticipation, she found that she could not bring herself to read it just yet. She wanted the multitude of possibilities to go on existing, and she knew that as soon as she opened it, only one would remain.

She brought the letter back to the sofa and set it down next to her coffee, which had begun to cool by now, a scrim of milk tightening across the surface. The envelope burned bright against the dark stone table. It was still slightly damp from its time at sea, corners worn down by rough hands and salted air. She considered making a little breakfast while she girded herself to read it, then glanced at the clock and realized there was no time for that. The day was racing ahead of its own volition now. She could either hide here at home, denying this, or rise to meet it.

Upstairs, she heard the thump of Jerome's feet hitting the floor. The creak of a hinge, the thrum of water running through the pipes. She was reminded that she didn't want to be here when he came downstairs. One edge of the envelope's flap was curling up, as if it might open itself were she to leave it unread for much longer. But, she reasoned, it had traveled such a long way to be here: on her table, in her home. Surely it could travel a little farther. She slotted it in among her other papers and left the coffee cup where it was.

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On her way to the university, the city was still quiet. She rode her bicycle, leaning into the steepness of the road with more tenacity than usual, pressing the weight of her body down hard on the pedals as she climbed, not bothering to temper the loud gust of her own breath. Letting it be ragged and rough. She poured herself into the physicality of the effort. This last year or two she'd begun to feel these hills in her joints differently and assumed she just needed to push herself harder to reclaim the buoyant elasticity of the