

What They Took From Us

The morning was blue. Not in any profound emotional sense—she'd barely been awake long enough to have doleful thoughts about the day. It was blue the way the mountains look blue from faraway. Perhaps some of that mysterious morning air found on mountaintops had migrated to ensconce the city streets. Sarah did not stop to admire it, but she breathed it in with the voracity of first life.

Her destination was a small, local-run coffee shop and the caffeine and solace it provided. A network of soggy, half-frozen puddles barricaded the door, testing her dedication and ingenuity. She growled at the inconvenience, blaming the world for this most recent attack on her peace of mind. But safe inside the door the small battle was already forgotten and a smile slipped back on her face.

"Your usual today, Sarah?" the barista greeted her.

"Make it a triple, Gino."

"Long week?"

"You have no idea," she confirmed while fishing in her purse for her wallet, "I've been vomited on three times. And I don't know what it is, but all my parents have been on edge."

"It's the winter."

"It's been winter for eight weeks now."

"Exactly. Christmas vacation is over, but winter is still here. Everybody's getting cabin fever."

“Well, I guess I’m their favorite punching bag right now.”

“Don’t let it get to you. They’re lucky to have you.”

“I know. I guess I’m just tired. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“How’re the folks?”

“I mentioned to my mom that I’m thinking about moving out and she went completely pale. Mom, I’m twenty-six not sixteen. I mean I’m grateful they let me live with them through school but it’s like I got stuck in this rut and I don’t understand it. I want to move forward.”

“That’s how it is with the baby,” Gino replied confidently, “We won’t let Joseph move out until after we’re dead, eh Joey?” he playfully ruffled the hair of the ten-year-old boy sitting on a stool to his left. Sarah smiled.

“Joey, don’t let him bully you,” she responded good naturedly, “you call me if you need an advocate.” Gino was handing over her coffee. “Thank you.”

“Have a good weekend, Sarah.”

“If I can survive today, I will.” She had dragged herself out of bed early in order to guarantee some quiet time with her coffee before work so she made her way to a quiet little corner.

The bell above the door vibrated ferociously, heralding the entrance of another customer. Sarah’s eyes gravitated toward the movement out of habit, but the face she saw was not one she had been expecting. He paused in the doorway, his eyes fastened purposefully on her face. She felt her ivory skin turn ghostly white

before being brushed with a telltale stroke of red. Her eyes dropped to the table in front of her. This must have been why she had been so tense all week. But how could she have known he would be here?

Her ears were trained to pick up the whispered conversations of inattentive students. Now they heard him ordering coffee. She could walk out right now. There was still time. But there were things she wanted to say to him. And when would she see him again? The echo of his footsteps marked his progress across the floor. She did not look at him when he stood beside her. Not even when he pulled out the chair to her left.

"That seat's taken," she couldn't help herself. She knew it was childish. But didn't he deserve it? He decided to take the high road and moved around the table. His quiet grace irked her. "So is that one." Hesitation.

"I'll move as soon as it's wanted," he promised gently. She knew she had lost the first scrimmage. "It's good to see you," the depth of emotion in his voice pierced her heart like a harpoon. But she was not prepared to throw her white flag.

"I wouldn't really know, would I?" she answered coldly. He accepted her anger like it was his duty. She had tried before to arouse his anger. It hadn't been easy then, either.

"Are you going to be angry at me every time I see you?"

She looked at him for the first time, "Does it make me angry when I remember what happened? Yes."

“Sarah, I did it for your own good.”

“You had no right to make that decision for me,” she said hotly, pulling out her lesson plans.

“We both know if I hadn’t you wouldn’t be able to move forward with your life.”

“The way I’m so obviously moving forward now? I canceled my last two dental appointments, do you know why? I knew that perky little assistant would ask me about my love life. And do you know what I’d have to tell her? ‘No, I’m not dating. I’m not in love. I’m twenty-six and I never really have been.’”

“You know that’s not true,” he whispered.

“No, I don’t. You decided that I shouldn’t ever know whether that’s true or not.” He looked at her with compassion, but not regret.

“How are your parents?”

She hesitated, “Protective.”

“And your students?”

“Adorable,” she said begrudgingly, “Even when they’re puking on me they’re still adorable. Although I keep chewing out Valero for transferring me from inner city, and I should probably stop that.”

“Yeah, you probably should.”

“Working with privileged parents is twice as hard.”

“It’s not permanent.”

“It feels permanent. I’ve been looking at my budget—trying to save up to buy a house or go back to school, or something.”

“Your parents won’t let you make any poor financial decisions.”

“I get short with them a lot.”

“They understand.” She was still scribbling away on her papers, avoiding his eyes. He watched her contentedly, as if none of his life had made any sense until this moment. And she pretended to ignore him, aware of similar feelings but wanting to punish him a little bit longer.

Gino had turned on an album with soft vocals to ease his sleepy customers into their day. But the sky outside did not share his consideration. Half-frozen drops of rain began pelting the asphalt, pinging off the tops of worn-down cars, and tapping persistently on the windows like a petulant child. Not to be outdone, the wind awoke with a temper, howling its grievances to anyone who would listen.

Sarah’s uninvited companion rose abruptly, retreating toward the door with the same singular purpose that had brought him in. She watched his back in alarm, her busy pen suddenly idle, her large brown eyes suddenly unguarded. Would he just leave like that? Without another word? Hadn’t he seen through it all—that it was just a tough charade? Did he really believe that she didn’t want him here?

She shoved back her chair with violent force, not even registering its wooden scream against the cold floor. But he heard it and his hand hesitated on the door as he turned back.

“Are you leaving?” Sarah had never mastered the art of subtlety. Her desperation rang through each word clearly as her arms hung limply by her side.

He couldn't help smiling. "I'm going to my car...to get my computer, because you seem determined to ignore me."

"But if you leave the room..."

"You can watch me through the window," he pointed to his car. She didn't sit down. The tears threatened to come and when he saw them he changed his course. She met him halfway, throwing her arms around his neck and painting his face with tears and kisses.

"I'm sorry I'm such a brat."

"You don't have to apologize."

"I have to be mad at you, at least at first. But I want you here."

"I know, I know." He stroked her hair as she cried into his shoulder for a few minutes. No one in the sleepy coffee shop disturbed them, but the frozen rain and icy wind made renewed charges at the window pane, as if trying desperately to drive the couple apart. The walls stood, at least for now.

"How long are you here?"

"Thirty-six hours leave," he answered. She sighed angrily at him. "But I've been promised a whole week in the near future."

"How near?"

"Maybe in three months."

"So after I'm dead, basically?"

"You can't die. It's in my contract. You are the safest citizen in this country. I've made sure of it," he tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear.

"The unhappiest citizen in this country. The worst part? Half the time I don't even know why I'm unhappy. I look around and everything

seems to be going well in my life except for the little part of me that remembers you in my dreams.”

“I’m sorry, Sarah. You know that I am. The Agency won’t undo it until my assignment is finished.”

“So tomorrow when you leave, I’ll forget again?” She asked as she always did.

“Yes.”

“And I’ll be alone again?”

“Just for a few months.”

“Do you have my ring?” He pulled at a chain around his neck, producing two rings. She watched anxiously as he fished it off the chain and slid it on her left hand. And then she breathed freely as she hadn’t done in months.