

## THE HOUSEPLANTS

This time of summer, the sun comes in around four. Today, I heard, it will be four on the minute, and around noon we all rouse ourselves awake, waiting for them to pull open the blinds of our window, waiting for the sun to shine in, finally, and make us warm. At least, that's the way it's always been. We awake in midday, a few hours before they let the sun in, and the blinds stay raised for two hours, until the sun has passed, moved on to the next building. Then they creak down, ever so slowly, leaving us with a cold wind and only rays coming in through the slats, and grand shadows sweeping across the floor. This is the way things have always been done, and it is the correct way, because this way we take in just the right amount of sun: the softer, early light as it builds, then the searing warmth when it's at full, then finally the sad sort of haze as it dies away. And when the two hours are up, no matter the season, the blinds close, because more than two hours isn't good for us, you know. We start to dry out, and get delirious, and who knows what else. Or that's what I've heard, in a hush late at night. No one I know has ever been left out in the sun. But it's happened in the past, before I got to the apartment, supposedly. Or so I've heard.

The hours when the sun comes in is also when the great rain falls. There is a woman, with long hair, who brings it over in a glass jug, and side by side we stand in our two lines, how we always stand, at the edge of the table that sits about halfway between the radiator and the window. Five of us in front, closest to the window, five of us in back. I stand in the back, and the rain falls on me usually last, and this I love, because one of my greatest pleasures of the day is looking up and watching as the jug moves over me, and seeing how the ceiling and the lights above warp and slide into round pockets of color as the glass passes by. And because we stand in two lines, there are days when some of us feel more sun than others – when the sun is weak and all we see out the window is grayness, or fog tinted with the gentle pink blur of the neon sign that hangs on the other side of the chasm of street below. And on these days, we accept that part of us may be concealed in a bit of shadow and stay cold for that afternoon. But we take comfort in knowing that the next day we'll position ourselves so that each neglected corner receives

its fair share, that we'll shuffle ever so slightly in the line to adjust for wilted spots and hungry skin. We do this quietly, and without protest. It's something that is *understood*.

Or it was.

Things have been changing around here. And I think, before the sun comes in today, I ought to tell you about the first time something went wrong. It was few weeks ago, a particularly thick day, and the clouds were lumped in the sky, and the apartment had a draft coming in from the hall. The sun was set to come in at 3:40.

### **THE FIRST TIME SOMETHING WENT WRONG**

I woke up hungry. I wake up hungry every day, but that day my belly was wrestling with pockets of air and making some sort of terrible sound intelligible only to me. Some of the people in the apartment seemed agitated that morning – doors were slamming, and keys clinking, and shoes being shuffled on and off. I stayed in a lull while this all went on, the slamming and the clinking and the shuffling. Then finally, it was quiet. I roused myself and tried to stave off the hunger, drawing water up through the roots that sunk into the soil below, and feeling it spread its cool touch into every corner of my being.

I can't quite recall the time between waking and what happened later. In fact, I often can't recall the dull hours in the middle of the day, because typically nothing of import happens. I remember seeing the cat slink across the table and knock over a glass of red juice, and watching as it dripped agonizingly to the floor, a drop at a time. Or maybe that was the day before. He's tired and slow, the cat, with a mane that's silver but with a tarnished sort of look, like old coins. He doesn't bother us much, except for sniffing at us once in a while, or occasionally standing in front of the sun and blocking its light. Usually, though, we're out of his reach.

In any case, the midday hours passed unnoticed. I started to rear up my attention as it neared sun-time, 3:30. I watched the little black sticks in the clock above the fridge inch towards the time, and the shadows start to curve and swoop over the walls.

Eventually, it was time.

I should have thought something was *off*, first of all, when the clock showed 3:45– sun time – then 3:46, then 3:50, then 4:00 – and still no one had come, and the blinds were still closed, and all that shone through was slats of light, and the rain and the great glass jug had not swooped over our heads. And I *truly* realized something was off when I heard not just the ordinary dying wheeze of the air conditioner, but on top of it a low murmur of their voices, and an intermittent rushing of the faucet, and in between, a tense moment of silence or two.

Some of the others next to me started to whisper –

*Where is she –*

*How should I know –*

*Shhh- just wait –*

*I'm cold, I'm so cold –*

*Shhh –*

*Quiet –*

*Here they come-*

They stepped into view, two of them, and we all hushed and went still, waiting. It was odd to see them both at once: the woman with the long hair that sometimes brushed over the top of my head, who arrived with the jug most days, and the other, the man with short hair, who seemed to attend to us only when the one with long hair was gone. And as the woman yanked the cords of the blinds and the white

heat seared into all of our dark spots, and as she raised the jug over us, I saw a strange sight like I had never seen before- not in any of my days in this apartment, and not in the dreams that sometimes flickered through my mind at night.

She passed the jug over the front row, the first few of us, and I watched as heaps of water to fell to them, and the lights above swam in the reflection of the glass, and twisted, and danced their familiar dance. I relaxed.

She turned first her elbow, then her whole arm towards the second row of us in the back. The man loomed above us, silent. Then I noticed something.

The water was running out.

She poured onto the first in the back row, and suddenly the water was no longer falling in heaps, but a thin stream, and then drops, until as she reached me, only a tiny puddle remained swirling in the base of the jug. And just as she tilted her arm, and the small droplets left began to slide towards me, the man with the short hair reached over and grabbed the jug from her arms.

*You're wasting it. There's not enough.*

He paused.

*Stop.*

He walked out with the jug, and she rushed after him.

That night, I slept in fits, wheels of hunger turning inside of me. I awoke, over and over, to see the blue light of the moon and the harsh pinks of the neon sign sliding in through the blinds. The others, waking every once in a while, tried to sympathize in whispers, telling me surely, the rain would fall on me

tomorrow, perhaps *first*, but I could tell they felt none of it in truth. I knew how they felt. They felt *spared*.

So you see, that was where it began. And it's only gotten worse since then. The next day, the man came in alone, and there was hardly any water in the jug at all: only enough, in fact, for the first row closest to the window. And the next day, the same, and the next, and each day even less water came - he seemed in a rush, dumping the water in one swift movement, taking no heed at all for those of us in the back who had begun to shrivel. And yesterday, I saw him pass by around sun-time, with a small glass of water, which I thought he would bring to us. But he did not come at all, and I noticed, later, that the glass sat on a nearby counter, empty - drunk, I thought, by him.

And that brings us to today: today, when the sun is set to come in around four.

#### **TODAY, WHEN THE SUN IS SET TO COME IN AT FOUR ON THE MINUTE.**

The day began strangely. I was rattled awake by shouts from down the hall that escalated, louder - I could hear the man and the woman with the long hair, their voices raised, and sharp, and mixed with the sounds of the front door closing and opening, and the rolling of suitcases. At one point, the man passed by us, his jacket on and his suitcase in tow. He disappeared into the kitchen, and I heard him curse as he cranked the faucet, but the usual rush of water, that signified the coming of the great rain, did not come. Eventually, he passed by rolling his suitcase once again, and more yells and curses came, from the woman this time, and pained yowls of the cat. And then, after maybe an hour or two, the slamming of doors and the yelling and the rolling died away, and the overhead lights went off, plunging the apartment into an eerie silence. And about an hour ago, the old air conditioner finally wheezed itself to death, leaving the dead air to sink, and hold all the heat, and the empty quiet. And so I sit now, the afternoon drudging on, the only sounds the yowls of the cat that grow ever sharper by the hour - so I sit, waiting in the dreadful quiet, thinking of how a waiting that was once thrilling, spent anticipating the monstrous heat

of the sun, has now become in its own way dreadful. I dread the heat of the sun now. Without rainfall, the heat *stings*, and yet, I need it still...

Eventually, the clock draws close to sun-time, and the whisper of the one who stands next to me in the back row shakes me from my thoughts.

*Look -*

*Hm? Look at what –*

*Look. The ones in front. Look. They've grown.*

I look, and there is no mistaking it. They have. To most, it would be barely noticeable, but I saw them the day before, and every other day before that, stared for hours at their forms as the sun came in. Today, they look taller, and more robust, and .... *lush*. And *healthy*.

I look over at the one beside me. Subtle lines of brown have crept into his skin, and in a distant part of him, a small corner has turned black and limp. And I can feel, I notice, areas of dark and cold on myself that had once been touched by the sun – areas that now are in shadows cast by the ever-widening leaves of those in front.

*They're blocking us from the sun.*

I use all my strength to slowly, ever so slowly, lean forward and brush myself up against one of the ones in front.

*Hello?*

He turns.

*Let us in. I pause. Make room for us.*

The others in front turn and look at one another. I can see in them a flash of that same sympathy as before - the kind of sympathy that is little more than fear, the kind that looks at you and sees only their own future, sees themselves small and withered and brown and hungry.

Others in the back row rouse themselves up to inch forward and join in.

*Let us in. We're not getting any sun.*

*Let us in.*

The ones in the front do not budge, and start, slowly, to turn back towards the window.

I look to the one beside me – at his weak body. And though he seems to be holding himself strong, there is a desperateness to his look, almost a pleading.

Somewhere below, the cat yowls, and scratches his claws at his empty metal bowl, making a horrid sound, like a clanking, an *emptiness*.

And then, all at once, I feel something stir within me. I push forward, finding myself urged forward by a drive I have never once felt before, a kind of fever that flies through every stalk and vein, moving closer and closer. I can *move* my body – stretch it, painfully, and on the verge of snapping, but I can *move*, (I am moving!) and I push, more and more, until those in the front started to squirm, and cry out – and all in a moment I see beside me the others moving as well, *pushing*. The ones in the front push back. A commotion erupts, and soon I can hear us all, pushing and shoving against those who have grown taller, and larger, and against the great power of the wind that blows in from the draft in the hall. We push and push, and I am tangled in a knot of stems and leaves and wind and sun with the white curtains above us like a canopy, when suddenly the table starts to shake, and one of the ones in the front, the one at the edge of the table, *starts to slip off*, teetering on the edge.

I pause, realizing that I am tangled up with him, and if I move, if I let go, he will fall. I can see him shaking, his leaves quivering, from the wind, maybe - or perhaps from fear. Someone behind me speaks.

*Pull him up. I think you can.*

*Pull him up.*

The table shakes again. The cat, I realize, has climbed up, and stands behind us, his paws in front of him, tail up.

The one teetering on the edge looks at me.

*Let me up. I'll let you move to the front. I will.*

I look back at him, and see once again just how *large* he has grown; larger, probably, than I will ever be. And I promise you, I am about to pull him up – I promise you, I am. And I feel within me a kind of a kind of *sympathy*; I promise you, I do, and I am ready to pull him up. But at that moment, I feel warm breath upon me, and smell the unmistakable smell of *animal*, and then in a single motion there is a great swipe of a paw and he clatters to the floor, falls all the way down. And then there is silence, the only sound left the laboring breath of the old, slow cat.

The draft dies away, and the curtains settle back down, and slowly everyone shifts back into place in shock. Or rather, *almost* everyone. As they move back, I inch myself into the spot in the front where he had been, the one who fell. And I stare straight ahead, out the window as the sun comes in slowly, in shreds at first, then grows into a great beam, illuminating all the motes of dust that hover above me, and seeping its heat into me. And I stay looking ahead, even as I can hear the sounds from the floor of crunching and scratching and biting and the ripping of leaves between cat claws, even as I hear the whimpers of those behind me, who seem to be watching what I know is happening, but do not want to see. I cannot move, not even as the others start to whisper, asking where the rain is, where the man with

the jug is. Not even when everyone realizes that the rain is not going to come. Not even as they start to whisper, about me now – about whether *I* will move, whether I will let them in. Not even as the evening churns on, and moon comes up. Not even then.

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Days pass in front of the window, and at first, I feel myself coming back to life – feel the sun streaming into my corners and making me green again, feel my strength returning. But with the blinds left open, the sun comes in *always*, not in the slats like it used to, and after a short time, I feel dry and cracking once more. We wait – wait for the man with the jug to come back, wait for the rain to fall again, but he never returns, and it never falls. I begin to hope for night – night, when I can dream, maybe, of the one with the long hair that brushes over me, when I can relish in the soft rays of moonlight that I can catch, letting its blue tones brush over my skin, and appreciating the silence. But when night does come, the pink neon lights of the city come in through the window, searing, and keep me awake. And if I do sleep for even a few seconds, I have wild dreams, not of the woman with the long hair, but of one of the others in the back growing large, billowing leaves, and *pushing me off*, and I see a vision of the one who fell, his roots snapped and limbs exposed, and I jolt back awake. None of the others seem to sleep either. I think they fear just the same from me. So I stay painfully alert, awake far into each morning when I can see the faint outline of the moon imprinted on the pale blue of the sky.

Days turn into weeks, and more than just the corners of me wilt, and brown, and crack. When a cold draft sometimes comes in from under the door, the white curtains still swirl and fall above us, embodied by the wind, but I do not move so gently like I used to – now, I am too brittle to sway in the wind at all. The cat no longer yowls, or scratches, and from somewhere in the apartment comes a horrible, hot stench, like something awful, like maybe melted old coins. And eventually I notice that the sounds that once came from the apartments above and below – the moving of furniture, the stomping of feet, sometimes the distant pulse of music, have all gone as well.

One day, I see something that I have long since forgotten, but somewhere in me have longed to see – great peals of rain, falling from the sky, for days and days and days. The others around me, or, at least those who have not bent fully over, their brown heads laying on the table, perk up, and for a moment I can feel that we are almost well again. But it lasts only a moment, until we remember that we cannot feel the water, and it will not reach us. I watch it slap against the window pane, and come in such droves that its grayness nearly obscures the pink of the harsh neon light. And I start to imagine, in my mind, that it will burst through and fall on me, and I will grow to the ceiling, and far out to the walls, and to the refrigerator, and the door, and I will create a forest of my own here inside the apartment, with canopies and grass and whole families of silver cats. But the window is strong, and the rain never bursts through, and eventually, it fades into drops. And when the rain finally goes, down below I see leagues of water rushing in, brownish water, sloshing where the streets once were, and people, tiny specs below, crowding into rafts, and sailing away.

The sun comes back in all its painful glory, and it is hotter, I think, than before. In fact, I know it is hotter than before. And I think this is where I must stop, because I can feel myself frying, and my mind fading into fog. But know this – that we will all stay on in front of the window, all through the night, and all through the terrible sun of the whole day, waiting, maybe, for the woman with the long hair, and the great glass jug above our heads, and the wheeze of the air conditioner, and the way the sun looked through the slats of the blinds. Or maybe – maybe, I begin to think, that is not what we should wait for. Maybe instead – maybe we should hope for the walls of the apartment building to collapse, and for us to fall down with our leaves billowing, all the way down, to the brown water below in the streets, that I imagine, I hope, comes from the sea, and it will nourish us and grow us anew. But until then, we will stay here, before the window - the window where I fear that we will die, the window where the sun shines hot, long, and always.