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Nothing at All

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Nothing At All

Sloan A. Volenec

I wanted to say something after it happened. Though it was a simple thing, a bump in the street, his shoulder against mine as our paths met, still I felt words lining up behind my teeth needing only a breath to set them free. But his lips were faster than mine, his tongue sharper. Two words escaped him like a growl. "Watch it," he said. Though it wasn't fear that graced my mind, nor was it concern. Anger sparked in my chest, I could feel it as though it were tangible, and it's warmth threatened to take hold, to find kindling and grow. I need only to feed it.

I wanted to. The righteous indignation held beneath my breast needed only the slightest provocation to be set free, like a bullet waiting for the tap of a firing pin. My finger tightened around my proverbial trigger, but a glance stayed my hand. Because I saw his face, and though there was a furrow in his brow, a flex at his jaw, it was his eyes that caught mine, because they were so very far away, looking at something only he could see.

And I wondered, were his words even directed at me? Or was I merely a faceless catalyst by which he could project some other slight, some other wrong? Perhaps then, I was nothing more to him than the intangible given form. Smoke given substance.

So he met me with words and gestures of cruel intention bearing down a tirade written in his mind long ago. Yet in its face, my umbrage turned to understanding, my snarl twisted into sympathy. The battle he waged was birthed some time ago, someplace away from where we met, yet still, he bore its wounds. So in the face of the fire he brought to bear, I wielded only silence. And in the aftermath of his fury, I offered a single apology.

"Sorry," I said, though it was not my sins I begged forgiveness for. If, in his eyes, I was to be the enemy at his gates, the idol of his wars, then perhaps I could offer the justice he had yet to find. It was not responsibility that drove me, nor obligation, nor fear. It was pity.

And when he turned to leave, venom dripping in his wake, I was left feeling forgotten. I was sure that should I see that man again, I would be a stranger to his eyes. It was of no consequence to me, I carried the slight no further than that moment. I could afford the weight, I held some small semblance of grace still within my chest born of a day filled with more fortunes than tragedies.

But what if I hadn't? What if my day had been one lost fight after another? What if I too carried scars from battles held before? Perhaps then I might be distracted in my pace. Perhaps then I would collide with another on the street, my shoulder against theirs. Maybe I might spit my own venom, launch my own tirade, at someone who's face I'd never see. I can only hope when that time comes to pass, for I am certain it will, that whoever I meet will carry more grace than I. I hope that they will know, as I now know, that sometimes the best thing to be said, is nothing at all.