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MORNING MAELSTROM

by

May V. Anderton

Commotion crowded the café.

“Merci,” I said, looking up. The waitress raised the pot. Her smile could have been a twitch. She nodded before stepping over to the next table. It seemed the whole neighborhood was here.

Our saucers clinked. I pulled mine toward me, pushed his toward him. Steam rose from the black liquid, and the aroma widened my eyes. I didn't add sugar, but I stirred anyway.

Across from me, he scooted his chair closer to the table and apologized for being late. He picked up the sugar dispenser. White crystal granules cascaded into his cup. He stirred, set down his spoon. He picked up his cup, then set it down.

He studied me as I surveyed the room.

A drowsy couple sat a few tables from us. The woman tried to catch her partner's eye, but he peered at his cup, transfixed.

The waitress moved from their table. She carried that pot gracefully, efficiently, filling cup after cup, starting along the back wall. People smiled at her or thanked her. She never said anything, only halfheartedly smiled back and nodded.

The grey sky muffled the midsummer morning; conversations became a steady grumble. A gentle wind sighed through the open doors and windows.

He snapped his fingers, bringing my eyes back to him.

I smiled politely. "Hi."

His face had pleased me once upon a time, from his piercing eyes to his untamed hair, to the squareness of his jaw, to the cleft in his chin. I had known his countenance for years now.

His voice blended in with the chattering. I couldn't hear everything he said, but I knew he was breaking up with me. He called last night. We agreed to meet here, at this time, for that reason. It didn't surprise me.

He slid his saucer a bit too quickly. A little liquid lurched and sloshed onto the table.

I kept stirring.

A woman sat by herself over by the far window. She looked wistfully out at the plaza. An infused fog floated from the two cups at her table.

I returned my gaze to the man across from me. His mouth formed words that stuttered through the pervading interference, words about our not talking to each other, about our growing apart, about our interests changing.

About our not loving each other anymore.

What was I supposed to say?

Spoons swirled in cups all around me and tapped bent melodies on the brims. I had a peripheral awareness of how my wrist kept rotating, round and round, guiding the spoon, first clockwise, then counter.

Bits of dialogue bounced around the room. The same, sad refrain swelled in hushed echoes and counterpoints throughout the crowd, like a fugue with a broken heart.

The nervous clatter from all the voices, the cups, the spoons jammed my ears.

He slid his saucer back in front of him.

My spoon kept moving, as did my eyes.

A woman at a corner table tore pieces of her croissant and dipped them in her coffee before eating them. The man sitting beside her leaned closer to her. His hands waved and pointed at something imaginary, which he seemed to be explaining. He looked at her patiently. He shrugged.

Her eyes focused on her morning sop.

The man sitting across from me raised his cup to his mouth, pressed his bottom lip against the close edge, and sipped. The liquid flowed between his teeth, and he swallowed. He sipped again. He closed his eyes while letting the coffee course through his body, his brain, his heart. He pursed his lips and exhaled.

I held my breath.

He set the cup down. He reached toward me and wrapped his clammy fingers around my hand.

He let go.

He sipped again.

Then, he drank deeply.

The waitress had begun to serve the center tables. She hadn't taken a break; she hadn't refilled the pot. She poured cup after cup, gave nod after formal nod. No one refused her. The scent of the

warm, dark nectar permeated the entire café and wafted outside, luring passersby to enter.

I put my spoon down on the saucer and looked back at the corner table. The woman was gone; her croissant was gone. The man that came with her looked confused and sullen. Lost. He scoped the café, perhaps wondering where his love had gone.

The man across from me said how I was a different person now. He asked where we went wrong, when I just stopped caring. He drank his coffee in between complaints of how I didn't meet his expectations, of how boring our relationship had become, of how much he had grown and improved and become a better person to make me happy—of how I'd made no effort to progress with him.

The waitress had already started bringing people their checks, outer tables first. Without breaking her stride, she placed a bill between our cups.

I took it. "Merci."

The man from the corner table left. A few moments later, two ladies, separately, also departed.

The waitress returned to the serving station. Smirking, she leaned against the counter and poured herself a glass of orange juice.

As my eyes followed her, the man across from me expressed that I was different but it wasn't a good kind of different, that his perspective had changed and mine hadn't, that I didn't see how much he felt sorry for me. I turned my head to face him. I strained to hear him as his voice merged with silence. He took one last gulp. He said I couldn't even see him.

Suddenly, and for a long time, it was true.