The Dying of the Light

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I am simply too young, I suppose, to understand what she means when she says she is ready to die. Maybe if it were a dying grandmother breathing her last, or a hero giving his life on the battlefield who was uttering these words it would be different. But she is unthreatened, a healthy individual, and mortality is a subject unsuitable for work. The spotless lab equipment surrounding me is not the sort that comforts a restless mind. So I try to brush it off. "That's good, I guess," I say, doing my best to convey that I do not find this topic appropriate. The sickening smell of bacteria cultures freshly sterilized by the heat of our autoclave pervades the room, persuading my coworker to open the door for some ventilation. We are the last two people left during the lunch hour, everyone else having abandoned the hostile environment for the fresh air outside.

She swivels her seat to face the lab bench, devoting her attention once more to the microscope in front of her. I imagine her eyes drying as the steady breeze of scrubbed and filtered air (guaranteed contamination-free up to six inches past the end of the workspace) takes its toll. My eyes tear up just thinking about it, but I use the sleeve of my shirt to brush them back to normal. The implacable humming of the incubators, sterilizers, refrigerators, freezers, and air filters adds up to a dull roar, so I put on my headphones and pretend the noise-canceling effect is better than it really is. A cartload of dirty glassware waits to join the already-gleaming assemblage drying nearby, so I stride to the sink only a few steps away from the microscope stations and start to scrub, surreptitiously glancing over every so often to make sure I'm not expected to be formulating a response.

I tell myself the reason I haven't said anything has something to do with preserving our working relationship. I owe it to her to keep my opinion to myself. I mean, she did get me this job, and while washing dishes is certainly not glamorous, it's fun to say I work in a plant genetics lab. That's what all this equipment is for. The large room full of sound and shining surfaces, all devoted to manipulating the life of corn and soybeans. Unending stacks of petri dishes with media solutions designed to weed out the plants that don't exhibit the desired traits. Test tubes with brand new green seedlings sprouting (except that they didn't come from seeds, but from carefully grown clones). Life pushing through the trials. We inject the plant tissue with customized DNA; then we try to kill it. If it survives,
the insertion is effective. In a way, the whole process is a testament to the struggle for life.

So maybe that’s the reason I am so put off by my coworker’s statement. Nobody should ever be ready to die. If we can expect the plants to fight against the odds we have stacked against them, the least we can do is follow suit. This is a subject where complacency is just intolerable. Fatal, really. A bottle slips from my soapy grip, my distraction evincing itself abruptly with the sound of splintering glass. I look over, slightly panicked, wondering if by chance the resounding noise has gone unnoticed by the person only five feet away. She hurriedly gets up to check on my situation, making sure the glass pieces are contained to the sink and that I haven’t somehow wounded myself. Satisfied that no lasting harm has been done, she returns to her chair, back to the work of moving plant tissue from one petri dish to another.

Her dirty blonde hair is showing evidence of silver, though its short styling draws little attention to the fact. The face it frames is not quite gentle, and the simple practicality of her cotton shirt and khaki pants gives hardly any indication that the body they cover once set five national cycling records in a single day. How much must have changed, I think, for there aren’t many things more life-affirming than the work that goes in to that sort of achievement. It is a celebration of the body and its ability to accomplish the extraordinary. But now, apparently, she is readying herself for death.

She has mentioned that she felt differently in her youth. That the unknowability of what comes after was troublesome. To me it is downright terrifying. And it is bothersome to think that somehow she has tricked herself into thinking it’s okay. That she has resigned herself to the inevitable. That she will go gentle into that good night. It makes me angry. Makes me want to rage for her against the dying of the light. From birth we have but one primary responsibility, and that is to live. How could she have forgotten that? I play what she said again in my head: I’m not afraid of it anymore. I used to be, but not now. I guess what I’m trying to say, is that if the house is burning down and you have to choose someone to save, don’t let it be me. I’m okay. Save your sister or something.

I finish the dishes, look over, and ask if she’s hungry. We leave the terrible smell of the lab behind and go outside to eat lunch together. It’s quite sunny, even a bit too warm, but the conditions are definitely preferable to the stench inside. Plus, artificial bulbs can’t compare to the light out here. Even if my mom is ready to die, I’m not ready to let her go.