

“THE BIRDS”

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The second week that I went to the clinic was the first time that I saw the birds.

The mother, or what I presumed to be the mother, was holed up in the narrow hollow of the oak tree in the front of my apartment building. It was a twenty-one minute walk to the clinic. I heard the baby birds before I had even turned the corner, even stepped back a few paces so that I could see up into the tree and find out where the chirping was coming from.

It only took me a minute to realize that the birds had actually created a nest in a hollow at the bottom of the tree, not the top, like I had initially thought. This worried me. Why would they make their nest so close to the ground? What was the mother thinking? I tried not to think of the chirps as I backed away from the tree, headed down the street. I had other things to worry about.

The clinic was nothing but a whirl of death and confusion. I tried not to look into anyone's eyes as I took care of each patient, trying not to scream when a dozen more were brought in around lunchtime. I visited the same patients over and over until they weren't there anymore, and today was no different. I knew nothing about medicine and I felt like I had never done anything important in my life, but someone had to do it. Someone had to do it.

They couldn't all just die.

I gently reeled back the flimsy plastic shower curtain we were using as makeshift separators for each patient, knelt as I said hello to Jon. He looked even more pale than I remembered from yesterday night; not a good sign. I really didn't have any experience, but after the first week of volunteering at the clinic, I knew more than I ever cared to. I wanted to explore queer America, and I wanted to run away from home, and I had gotten far more than I had bargained for.

No. This *was* queer America. But why did I feel like I hadn't gotten what I wanted?

Jon tried to smile at me as I looked uselessly at his bed trimmings. He looked as if he hadn't moved since I last saw him. His eyes were purple and green, bruised. I knew he couldn't speak thanks to the hoarseness in his lungs, cutting off his voice, but his eyes still held their light. Veins strangled through his pale body, spider-webbing out through his arms. He looked like he had been poisoned. *Poisoned since birth* they would say, but they said that about all of us.

I knew his eyes followed me as I tried to do whatever I could, looking back at my clipboard, looking back at the wires, checking to make sure everything was in its place. I wasn't sure why I always expected to find some sort of relief after I had finished checking on some of the worst patients, but the minute I let the flimsy plastic of the shower curtain fall behind me, I was just stepping into more of it. More patients were being wheeled in every day, the volunteers at the clinic keeping their eyes averted, darkened, down at the ground. Was this where we belonged? I was so afraid that I felt nothing, but I couldn't ignore the feeling that I was holding my breath the entire time I was at the clinic.

Night fell eventually, as it always does. A lot of the women stayed at the clinic overnight; not in case anyone were to need them, but in case anyone passed away. It was a terrible thing to go wherever queer people went after they died, and to go there alone? It was much more frightening to pass over because a lot of us didn't have any of the answers. And what's more; where did people go if they had this sickness? Would we all be next? Would we all die?

My mind was blank as I walked the few blocks back to my apartment building. I thought of absolutely nothing as I counted my steps, my eyes glued to the dirty cement, used to the downcast. I counted my breaths until they seemed to return to a normal pace, but I didn't really know what normal was anymore. It had been ages since I had been anywhere except the clinic. I wondered bleakly if I had any food in the fridge for that night's meal, and then realized I had been wondering about that for the past two weeks. There was nothing, I knew. There was always nothing.

And then, just as I rounded the corner, I spotted something on the sidewalk. I had almost trodden on it; it was lumped in the small gap of space between where the cement ended and the grass began. It was small and brown and slightly fuzzy. If I hadn't been trained to look for the slightest bit of movement, the slightest bit of breath, any indication that the body was still alive, I might not have even realized that the lump was the baby bird I had heard earlier that day. I had almost completely forgotten about them. I looked up, and sure enough, I was standing right by the oak tree, the hollow that was too close to the ground lingering at the corner of my vision.

I peered into the hollow, where I had seen a shadow of a mother that morning. If you hadn't looked very closely, you would've thought she was still there, sitting on her eggs, that they hadn't hatched yet, that everything was normal. Everything appeared normal, until I realized the mother was nowhere to be found, the nest covered in shadows. Where was she? Had she flown away to look for food? Maybe she was looking for her baby, or maybe she had abandoned it all together.

I wasn't used to wasting time, so I walked up to my apartment, put on a pair of rubbery garden gloves and walked back down to the sidewalk where the lump was still heaving. Had it tried to fly to its mother? How had it gotten out of the nest in the first place? Had something tried to eat it? Was there a predator around? And where *was* the mother?

I knelt and gently scooped the frail thing into my cupped hands. It was no bigger than my palm and seemed so, so afraid. I could feel its life quivering against the gloves, against my skin, and I felt it all the way up my arms. I walked carefully over to the hollow where the shadow of the mother bird had sat, and slid the small baby bird onto the clump of dry leaves. Its tiny eyes blinked up at me, and I couldn't help but feel like I was back at the clinic, staring into the dead, glassy eyes of another person who had passed away. Would Jon be dead when I went back tomorrow morning? Or was he already dead?

The next morning, I came out early to check on the baby. I had reassured myself that the mother would be back, but as I peered inside the hollow, it was still completely empty. No mother and what's more, there was no baby. Panic rose in my throat, and I immediately went back a couple steps to check the sidewalk, the place where I had found the baby before. I didn't find it there, and I ran along the entire length of the sidewalk by the oak tree, still not seeing anything. I was afraid I stepped on it, so I looked at the bottom of my shoes, tears pricking the corner of my eyes, but I didn't see anything there either. What had happened to them? What had happened to us?

I was breathing very fast, and people were starting to come out of the apartment building. They were looking at me funny, but then again, they always looked at me funny because they knew I was gay. They knew I spent every day working at the clinic. They probably thought if they got too close to me they would catch the "gay cancer" too. And what if that's what it was? None of us could tell them they were wrong, that they were wrong about all of us. That they should be wrong for wanting us to die, for wanting us to take the blame.

And where was the baby bird? Where was the baby bird's mother?

After another half hour of searching, I found it, nestled in a grove of saw palms by the entrance of the apartment complex. No one would've ever seen it unless they had thought to look between the fronds, but if you were walking by and just happened to look down, there's no way you would've missed it. It looked the same as the night before, but I couldn't help wondering if it was actually dead. I think I would've found more relief if that were the case, but I took myself back up the apartment steps, put on the gardening gloves, and lifted its frail body once again. I wasn't sure how, but I swear I felt the heartbeat against my own skin. It was alive. It was alive.

I turned around and started heading towards the oak tree, but stopped. The hollow was far too close to the ground. Wouldn't the baby just get out of the nest again? And the mother still hadn't returned, so how would the baby get any food? How did biology even work? Did it even work at all? I didn't know that much about birds.

I thought about taking the baby bird back into my apartment building and nursing it back to health myself. I could be its new mother and feed it from a tiny baby bottle just like it was a doll. Just like it was my actual baby, the one I would most likely never have. People hated gay people so much that they let them die, day in and day out. There would be no chance I could ever have a child. I didn't even have a partner, didn't even have time to go out and find one. The other lesbians at the clinic were far too busy averting their eyes, far too busy working to save the men from a death they knew was only too certain, far too busy pretending and avoiding and hiding their tears and then waiting in line to give blood once they were done working and not working all day. I know that's what I did, and I knew they were all the same. After all, how could there be love at a time like this? And wasn't it love that had gotten us all into this mess in the first place? Some sort of messed-up, non-biological love that went against nature itself? Isn't that why we were infected in the first place, why we were all dying?

We were all the same.

I felt something break inside me, and I walked the baby bird back over to the oak tree, bent down just slightly, and tipped it back into the empty nest. I would've liked to be its mother. No, I would've loved to be its mother. I would've loved to be something, someone I am not. No. Lesbians could not be mothers. Gay people could not be parents. How could they be parents if they were dead? And after all, what if the true mother ended up coming back? What if she had been there during the night, and had flown off this morning to find more food for her baby? No. I had better let the true mother take care of this. If she came back and found out her baby had been stolen, well... I didn't know much about biology, but I would've been upset.

I went back up to my apartment, threw off the gloves, ate a crust of stale bread, and headed down to the clinic, counting every sidewalk panel that fell in between.

As soon as I walked inside, I stopped breathing. I wondered if Jon had died during the night, had also stopped breathing, and thought better than to ask one of the other volunteers, since their eyes were perpetually facing towards the ground anyway. There would be no chance for me to ask. There was no casualty. I just had to wait until I made my rounds through all of the patients. I could do nothing else.

There were a few new ones today, and I had to take an extra long time getting them all comfortable and set up, but I couldn't help thinking

I was only setting them up for their deaths, which I guess I was. I tried not to think of the baby bird, sitting alone in the nest, wondering where its mother was. Wondering where I was. No. I was needed here. Where were the mothers of these people?

I was so busy thinking about the birds and mothers and fertility and motherhood and what it all meant that I didn't realize when I was standing in Jon's screened-off room. He smiled at me like he was glad to see me, like he was glad to see another day. I couldn't imagine the pain he was in, though I'm pretty sure he looked the same as yesterday. That's what they always said; that it started off really bad, and then got worse, and then it just settled in, the pneumonia or bronchitis or whatever it was that targeted us. That targeted them. None of the lesbians in the clinic or the ones I knew had ever contracted anything like it. We all wore protective gear of course, whatever we could afford, whatever we could scrounge up, but I had never known a lesbian to catch it. We didn't know why, but that didn't make it any less real, any less scary. Yes, they had called us "fish", yes, they had mocked us constantly, but we were the only family any of us had. We had to stick together, or else we would be out there dying on the street. Dying on the street, just like the baby bird.

I nearly flew out of the clinic that day, and counted my breaths and steps extra fast as I made my way back to the apartment, to the oak tree, to my baby bird. I could see the oak tree from all the way down the block, and had to do everything in my power not to run all the way there. Maybe the mother had come back only moments after I had left for the clinic that morning. Maybe everything was okay. Maybe God would actually forgive us; and if not us, maybe he would forgive the birds.

I finally reached the tree, bent down slightly, and peered into the nest, holding my breath.

The mother was there, or what I presumed to be the mother; a large, plump bird whose girth covered almost the entire top of the nest. My heart nearly plummeted into my chest when I realized I didn't see the baby bird at all, but then I noticed, just underneath the mothers' heavy layer of feathers, something small and quivering, brown and fuzzy. I couldn't help it; I burst into tears.

That night, I dreamt of motherhood, of a small child wearing green gardening gloves and my eyes, following around a woman with no face. Everything was fuzzy, vague, but it felt so real, as dreams often do. The first few minutes after I woke up, I stayed with my eyes closed, trying to fall back asleep, anything so that I could fall back into the dream, but the knowledge of it faded with every second that passed, until I couldn't even remember why I had been lying in bed for so long, or why I felt so exhausted, so drained, and so hopeless.

I went downstairs, stepped up to the oak tree, and bent down to look inside the hollow. The mother was there, sitting on top of her baby like it was still an egg. If I had known anything about biology I might've thought that was a bit strange, but I thought nothing of it. After all, I was already late to my shift at the clinic. They needed me more. The baby had its mother now, didn't it? Perhaps the mother was just trying to nurse the baby back to health. Perhaps the baby was cold. Cold, yes.

New patients again. It was all a blur of eyes slashed towards the floor, eyeless patients, bloodshot eyes, tired eyes, death. I went to Jon's bedside, filled up his glass of water. There was word of him possibly needing a feeding tube. There was fluid in his lungs. Hadn't there always been fluid in his lungs? Wasn't that what pneumonia was? But it didn't matter what pneumonia was, because he was gay, and no one was going to help him except for a couple of lesbians playing doctor, or more appropriately, playing nurse. I didn't say anything, just listened as they spoke of Jon's impending death. I thought it was strange; they spoke directly to the floor. Couldn't Jon hear them, or had his ears gone too?

The afternoon came, and I had moved on to my other patients. There were more and more of them now, and the days got longer and longer. I felt horrible after thinking I would be too tired to take care of them all, that some of them had to be let go. What were we even trying to do here? We could never have saved them.

Jon ended up passing away right before my shift was over. I stayed to watch him become covered by a black sheet, trash bag. What would they do with the body? I found myself wondering, and then realized I didn't know what they did with any of the bodies, where they were disposed of. No one wanted a gay body, dead or alive, not even their families. Not even their mothers. So where did they go?

I decided once again to avert my eyes, to not think about anything other than the fact that Jon was, finally, no longer in pain, but even that felt like a lie. I counted my breaths and I counted my steps until I was right up against the base of the oak tree, but this time, it wasn't dusk like it normally was. It was past dusk, but not quite nighttime yet; a gathering of darkness, you could say. I peered into the hollow, saw the mother in the exact same place, the baby, quivering, fuzzy, brown, underneath her once again. It only took a few seconds to check on them, and I felt happy. At least they had made it.

That night I dreamed of a graveyard, and I knew I was looking at the graves of my family, the ones from the dream the night before. The faceless, eyeless woman, my partner, the mother of the little boy with garden gloves, the one who wore my face. I was the mother too, but I was also looking at my own grave. I woke up with tears wet on my face and I screamed and screamed and screamed until my throat was raw and I was sure my neighbors wouldn't wake up and call the cops on me. It was just enough and not enough. Why couldn't I ever have enough? Why couldn't I ever be enough?

I stayed up so that I wouldn't see the graves, but every time I closed my eyes they were there, just at the back of my eyelids. I ignored them and tried to keep my eyes open for most of the day, tried to not even blink. I forgot entirely to check in on the birds that morning, but part of me was glad that I didn't see them. Their love and happiness would be too much for me to bear.

Instead, I busied myself at the clinic like I always did. A dozen new patients today, and some new information about the virus. Another volunteer sidled up next to me as I was walking between the curtains and said they finally had a new name for the virus that wasn't "gay-related immune deficiency." She said it was now proper to call it AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome. The volunteer had curly auburn hair and smelled of coconut shampoo. She walked away before I could say anything, and before I could think not to, I blinked and saw the backs of the graves etched against my eyelids.

I stood completely still for a moment. What did a name mean? Did it mean they cared about us? Did it mean they cared about the ones who were dying? The ones who were already dead?

No. I certainly knew better than to think that way. But I couldn't take it. I saw my child, all my children, being wheeled out of the clinic, their body parts stuffed in black trash bags, saw my wife, my partner, faceless and screaming, pulling at her sockets, until she too was wheeled from the room, her body dumped into a sewer, or burned, incinerated, the ashes only to be forgotten and thrown away, onto a huge pile with all the rest. What would happen to them? What would happen to me? What would happen to the birds?

I excused myself and threw myself from the clinic. I ran down the block, faster and faster, the number of sidewalk panels throwing themselves up against my brain. I kept my eyes peeled open, and I saw no darkness except for the outline of the oak tree against the blue, blue sky. It was too blue, too happy. Nothing should be that blue.

I made it to the tree, and lowered myself to the ground, turning away from the mouth of the hollow as I heaved and panted. I didn't want to scare the birds away. Once I had finally regained an ounce of my breath, I turned and looked at them, into the mothers' wild, wild eyes. They had not moved an inch since last night. I felt furious. I wanted to fling them both from the tree, the baby gently, the mother more roughly. I wanted to shake the feathers from her body, pluck her like a chicken. Why hadn't she gotten the baby any food? Why hadn't she left the hollow in days? What was going on? I knew she didn't fly away while I was gone; she never went anywhere. Why was she sitting on her baby like that, like it was already dead? I dared not move her to check, but I knew with all my being that I hated that mother bird, that I hated her more than the people that hated me, that hated all of us, that caused us to die, that didn't care enough about death to find a way to stop it, but only could think about it long enough for a name, a more a suitable name...

I stood up, wiped my face on my sleeve, and walked my way, slowly, to the clinic again. I still had a few more hours of time left there, and I had probably wasted far too many minutes being gone. The birds were fine and I had to accept that. They were fine without me.

By the time I had finished my shift, I had seen the volunteer with the auburn hair four more times and six more patients had died. I guess now I could say for sure they died of AIDS, but somehow those words together in that order seemed like a poison, like their lives were cheapened due to the term. I could imagine why it felt that way, tried not to think about it, and averted my eyes until the sun dipped behind the clouds.

That night, I walked home far slower than normal; or maybe it just seemed like it after my rage-induced run during the afternoon. Jon was dead and gone. My imaginary family was dead as well, but that one was far worse because they had never even existed in the first place. They would never exist. They could never even hope to exist.

I traipsed my way up to the oak tree, slowly, as if a part of me never wanted to look inside the hollow ever again, as if my body had developed a natural aversion to the entirety of the tree. A cricket chirped nearby, announcing the arrival of night. It wasn't quite nighttime yet, but it was past dusk; a gathering of darkness, you could say.

I looked inside the hollow tree and saw immediately that the mother bird was no longer there, though her shadow still remained, etched upon the bark like some sort of permanent looming ghost. I looked down farther into the nest and saw the sharp outline of the baby bird, but something was wrong; it was dead, and it had been long dead, a few days at least. The tiny white bone of the beak was starting to peek through the decomposing brown fuzz, and I could see the skin beginning to fall away from the ribs. Inside the stomach, a few wasps buzzed and ate their way through. The baby bird had been dead for days.

And where had the mother gone?

But that night, despite it all, I dreamed of doves nonetheless.