





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-o

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 bring 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 gone and I had to accept that. They were gone 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.

At 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.