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Category: Short Story

Little Bird

What is it to be hollow? Is it hollow to feel that every inch of space below your skin is no more than a dark pocket of oxygen? I disagree. I can feel blood pumping through my veins, I can feel my bones cracking when I stand to say the Pledge of Allegiance alongside my exhausted class. Yet, despite all this, despite feeling the matter under my skin, the body parts that make me a human, organs, and blood, and cells, I still feel hollow.

Hundreds of footsteps pound against the tile flooring of the highschool corridor. Voices buzz in a never-ending trill of conversation. Faces blur by. Pink cheeks from the crisp morning air, hundreds of faces, none of them worthwhile.

"Dae." I hear my name spoken in a soft voice, one I know better than I know my own, and yet I ignore it.

"Dae," the voice says again, closer and with more authority, but I continue to feign obliviousness. I work slowly to input the combination to my chipped locker, basking in my dwindling moments of peace.

"Dae?" he finally says, catching up to me and gasping for air whilst leaning against the locker to my right.

"What's up?" My voice is soft and barely audible over the buzz of my peers.

"You didn't hear me calling your name?" he asks, finally prompting me to look at him. He isn't terribly taller than me, but I still have to tilt my face up slightly to look at him. Wren has been my friend ever since I transferred to Darling Falls; I transferred two years ago. In my first year, I sat behind him in Physics and we hit it off. Back then, Wren was no more than a small freshman swimming in an ocean of people and doing whatever he could to stay afloat. Eventually, he grew into his body and face, leaving him with a snowy pale complexion with carefully crafted curves and contours all over his marble-like face. He transformed into a slim athletic body, one which it seems every underclassman girl has developed an infatuation with.

"Can you honestly hear anything in these halls?" I respond, pulling out a pair of textbooks that arguably weigh more than some of the freshmen. Wren doesn't respond, he simply follows me through the swarms of people all the way to a hidden classroom near the stairs. The student population had risen so fast that a lot of rooms had to be fabricated for the sake of having enough space for everyone to get a "quality education." Not that listening to Miss Birtle rant about her Tinder dates for 45 minutes and allowing us a pass on homework is my definition of quality education, but to each their own.

I settle in my chair and Wren slumps into his. I don't look at him, I simply lose myself in the rhythmic clicking of my pen.

Click.

"Oh my god, you guys - Wait, is that offensive to say?" Miss. Birtle starts off.

Click.

"So he ate my food and just left! Can you guys believe that!"

Click.

"I just really c-c-can't believe h-h-he w-w-would do th-th-that to m-me..."

Click.

Miss Birtle finally shuts up and disperses our assignments a whole 45 minutes into class. I fall into a stable beat of answering a question and then guiding Wren in the right direction to getting at least somewhat close to the correct answer. The hour winds down, only for the bell to announce a sweet, *sweet* release from Miss Birtle's emotional hormonal den of a classroom. I stop beside the stairs and wait for Wren to join me.

"Well, that was interesting," he states, leaning up against me. I only nod and look at all the daze-painted faces of my peers as they breeze past, completely oblivious to the world around them.

"Ready for Choir?" he asks after a few beats of silence. I gnaw the inside of my cheek, carefully inspecting his question.

"I think I'm going to skip," I finally decide glancing up at his disapproving gaze.

"Really?"

"I don't feel like it today." I shrug, which seems to be a major motif in conversations that include my monotone pessimistic input.

"I don't feel like being in school today, but you don't see me just--"

"Bye Wren," I interrupt him, already making my way upstairs, his only response being the roll of his eyes and his anxious footsteps thrusting him down the corridor.

This isn't the first time I've skipped class; I keep my grades pristine so my teachers don't tend to give much thought to my seat being empty.

I follow the curved staircase tucked away in a janitorial closet no one ever locks, then I cling to an old rusted ladder all the way up to a small rusted roof access panel. It's been opened recently. Cool air rushes through new cracks in the entrance that should normally be sealed off completely.

I push the 20-pound hatch open with a groan and climb out into the April air, leveling on cautious curiosity. My eyes slowly scan the plane of sun-bleached tar in front of me; I don't see anyone, at least not at the moment, so I pull myself completely up and let my backpack prop the trap door open as I take in my surroundings.

My high school is rooted in the middle of nowhere, the surrounding land garnished with two different types of farms on either side and a cow pasture a mile up the road.

The school was just recently built five years ago, but there were already reconstruction plans in the making due to the massive influx of students. So many new faces, so many menial bodies that will graduate, only to escape to college for four years bound to pursue a meaningless life and career with two snot-nose kids that cry whenever they don't get what they want. It's a pathetic world and an even more pathetic community of Darling Falls.

I strut my way to the edge of the building, looking out on a parking lot filled to the brim with old and abused trucks just barely holding themselves together with twine and duct tape. That's when I hear it, the melodic tone of a few gasping stifled sobs floating over the roof. I look up to the cloud-painted sky and take a deep breath.

The girl who sits crying with her legs dangling off the edge of the roof is not one I recognize. She is facing away from me, but I do see long flowing brown hair with highlights of honey elegantly drawn in. Her frame is small and bony like that of a bird. She wears a small green dress neatly laid against her porcelain skin. I take a few steps toward her, and her dainty fingers rise to her face, which is hidden behind a blanket of long flowing hair.

"Hello?" I have to cringe at my own question. My tone is dodgy and unsure, and my voice cracked in the middle of that single word. The girl doesn't respond, but simply looks down and shifts away from me, her hair separating over her back and displaying her vertebrae making a ridge in her snowy skin.

"It's not very safe up here," I comment in an attempt at humor as I step a bit closer.

"I don't care." Her voice is small and high, it hicks and rips over the hard letters in her short statement, sounding like sandpaper. Somehow, that sound makes her voice resonate angelically.

"What's your name?" I ask, again stepping a bit closer. My reducing proximity to her results in her scooting closer to the edge, freezing me in my motion.

"That doesn't matter," she spits out, causing another onslaught of tears and snotty sniffles. Her little body quivers under the invisible force of raw, unfiltered emotion.

"I think it matters," I conclude, finally getting a little control of my voice. I sink down to the cool ground directly behind the girl, and I think she knows I've sat down because she doesn't move away. She simply remains perfectly still, an occasional ripple of contained cries settling over her bird-like frame.

"It doesn't," she replies, her voice forlorn and dejected.

"Then I'm calling you Little Bird."

"Why?"

"You're sitting on the roof and you're small." The girl giggles a little; she can't be older than 14 years old.

"You like that?" I ask, a smile teasing my lips, a smile she of course can't see, but I hope she can pick up on.

"I don't care." The momentary joy that had been lodged in her laugh dies out as quickly as it was created.

"Alright then, Little Bird, why are you up here?" She doesn't respond immediately, and I see her little head look down upon the concrete three stories below her fragile little body.

"I like being high up." *Me too*, I think, but don't say, of course. Her behavior, despite it being almost a perfect reflection of mine, shouldn't be encouraged.

"Why were you crying?"

"My mom," she replies, her voice breaking down again.

"What's wrong with your mom?" I ask softly. Memories flood my own mind, my mother's pale angular face and dull grey eyes looking deeply into my own inquisitive ones, her face twisted in agony as she laid in the hospital bed, medicine pumping through her faster than her blood could handle.

"She died." The wind dies instantly, the distant geese in the field stop honking, and the hum of electricity dies out.

"I'm so sorry," I finally spit out awkwardly. I think she picks up on my discomfort as she leans forward and ponders the steep drop below. She stares down for a while.

"It's not worth it, you know," I whisper just loud enough for her to hear if she's listening. I reflect on my own time chained to a hospital bed, being asked a thousand different questions in desperate attempts by doctors to comprehend why a 14-year-old girl would try to throw herself from the top of a building. The only reason I didn't succeed was the young man, a new transfer just like me. I only broke a rib from the hit I took as Wren's body entrapped mine under it.

"How do you know?" she asks through racking sobs.

"I just do." She pauses for a moment, her body jerking every which way from containing her cries. She scoots away from the ledge and stands. Now that she isn't sitting, I can see that she is short and has an almost skeletal body. Her limbs are small and malnourished and the dress that would be tight on anyone else her age drapes over her body, two sizes too big from the looks of it.

She turns. Her face is that of a pale doll's face, softly sculpted into a shape that would grow into sharp striking features, just like mom's. *Mom's. Why does she look like mom?* Her eyes are grey and deep-set in her skull, offset by the almost purple bags under her eyes. There is dried and cracked snot above her thin pale lips, and she quivers with grief.

This girl, this face, she's me.

"Dae," I say, and she looks up from her tattered shoes and stares at me in disbelief.

"No one knows me." She pauses, glancing out over the edge. "NO ONE LIKES ME!" she screams, her gentle face contracting in desperate anger.

"Dae," I pause at the sound of my own name. "Come here."

"NO!" she screams, pressing her hands to her temples and forcing her nails into her skin, making her small eyes collapse into a pained squint as tears pour from them.

"Get away from the ledge," I beg as levelly as I can, outstretching my hand and taking an uneasy step forward. The girl's eyes inquisitively stare at my hand; they examine every subtle contour of the creases in my palm.

"No." She puts her arms out and falls backward, sinking into the moisture-thick air and plummeting down, all in a single moment, one single moment that goes on forever.

"NO!" I can barely scream, my voice is as hoarse as hers as I lunge myself forward, landing at the edge and bouncing close enough for my arm to dangle out into the open air.

"No no no no no!" My heart is pounding, tears shoot from my eyes like missiles. *What did I do?* I bite my lip and look down, my stomach churning in preparation for the grisly sight below.

There's nobody. There's no miniature version of me laid out on the sidewalk, no appendages twisted in sickly directions. No blood painting the cream-colored cement a deep red. There is no one and nothing.

"Dae?" a voice asks. This can't be real, it can't. There should be a girl, a broken little girl on the sidewalk, cold and lifeless from a deadly drop.

"Dae, what happened?" Large warm hands latch onto my shoulders, and they heave me away from the edge of the building.

"She's gone," I whine in a barely audible cry. Wren holds my quivering body close, wrapping me in warmth.

"What are you talking about, Dae?" he asks, pressing his palm to my small head, pulling me closer to his chest where his heart beats steadily. I raise one shaking hand to point at the side of the building.

"You shouldn't come up here anymore." He dismisses me, shifting his weight and his hold on me.

"You know what happened here," he starts, doing his best to meet my gaze, before giving up and grabbing my chin, forcing me to look at him.

"You almost died up here, you shouldn't come up here anymore." He glances down with a sick look in his eye to look over my rib cage.

"You don't understand, she just, she-"

"Who, Dae?" he breathes with a critical stare.

"Me."