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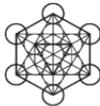
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HUM

NATALIA HERO



I.



I wake up naked next to him and I don't know what happened but I know he's been inside me. My body feels wrong. It aches when I move. Limbs limp. I roll over slowly, pick my purse up from the floor, check my phone. Maybe this is okay, maybe it isn't so bad. It's 4:03 a.m. and I don't know where the last three hours went. Missed calls and texts from friends wondering where I'm at. I see that I sent them all the same thing around 12:30: "Help."

That's when I start screaming. A cry that I pull from every part of my body that he touched without permission. I scream at him to call me a cab. When he gets off the phone he offers to wait with me outside. I scream at him to stay away. I run out and sit on the sidewalk. I try to control my breathing but there's something inside me that isn't welcome. I want it to leave.

When the cab arrives I get up trembling. Vibrating. The driver is friendly. He asks, "How was your night?" and I don't know how to answer him so I say, "Thank you, thank you so much, thank you." My body still shaking. Something buzzing inside me. Something angry. When we stop at a red light I can hear it. The driver looks up at me in the rear-view mirror.

"Is that your phone?"

“What?” I start coughing to cover up the sound. I feel it vibrating more powerfully inside my chest, thrashing around like it’s suffocating. Like it’s trying to escape.

“Do you hear that? There’s a hum. Or, like, a buzzing sound. Is it the car?”

“Listen, you can drop me off here, it’s just another few blocks. I think I’m gonna puke.”

He stops the car and I hand him two twenties. I tell him to keep the change, thank him again, slam the door and run up the street. Pain in my chest that makes me drop to my knees. I cough and gag and scream and then finally it flies out of my mouth. I put my head down and cry, resigned and exhausted. Empty. Through my sobs I can still hear a soft little murmur. I look up and it’s there, hovering in front of my face, staring me right in the eyes.



It follows me home. My arms are too heavy to shoo it away. It enters my space, buzzes back and forth, wall to wall, in panic. When I try to leave the room it swoops down and pecks my neck. It's loud. Its wings like a chopper flying overhead, ready to invade. Like rolling thunder, like the Ride of the Valkyries. The sound makes my heart beat fast and my breathing quick, uneven. It's too fast for me. I can't keep up.



I check my phone to take inventory of other perspectives. The boys are annoyed that I asked for Help when I was safe with someone. “We were worried about you. We thought something happened. You could have told us you were just hooking up with someone.” The boys congratulate me for getting laid. I try to tell one of them that that wasn’t what I had wanted. He says, “What, you think you’re too good for him?” I wonder if I’m conceited. Or overreacting. Or still drunk.

I look him up and click through his pictures. A lot of gym selfies. In one of them he’s wearing a t-shirt that says *Pain is weakness leaving the body*. Pictures with some of the boys from work. One with a woman and a child. I send him a friend request. And I’m the bird, watching myself from the ceiling, watching myself send him a friend request. As I click, it suddenly does a steep nosedive into my neck. The pain jolts me back into my body. The last place I want to be.



I don't go to work on Monday. I e-mail in sick. My voice doesn't have the strength to crawl out of its nest. Deep down in my throat, it festers. Decomposes.

Nothing makes sense. I don't know what's happening to me. I've hardly left my bed. Or eaten. Or slept, but I don't feel awake. My gaze is soft. I watch it fly. It darts around the room all day. When I go to the washroom it follows me inside. If I try to shower, get food from the kitchen, reach for my phone, it attacks. So I don't try. So it stays with me, hovering in front of my face expectantly. What does it want. Why is it still here.



A lot of things happened. I pluck them from my memory one by one. I classify them: the things I think, the things I know, the things I can only guess. And the blank spaces between them, concealed intermissions.

I know I drank too much. I know he was there. I think I was pushed. I know that I fell. I think he helped me up, asked if I was alright. I think he said he'd take care of me. And I think I said No, but I know he wouldn't leave. I know I tried to ask for help. I tried, in the bathroom, to say to someone, can you help. He's following me, can you get him to stop. I know I tried to. But I guess I didn't. And I tried to sneak away, but he was always right behind me. He said he'd take care of me. Grabbed me by the arm, squeezed tight—I have bruises, polka-dot fingerprints. Pulled me away, threw me in a taxi. Threw me? Did I fight? I think someone asked before he shut the door, are you okay? Did I say something? I stumble into deep holes in my memory. They trap and hold me prisoner. I guess I dug them myself.

And then in the room, and then on the bed. And I know I said No. I think I said No. I think I tried, I guess I tried, but I don't know. I know that I wanted to say No. But I don't think there was a question to answer No to.

I can't stay with one thought for more than a second without the bird acting up. I close my eyes. I close my eyes to stop thinking, but I still can hear it hum.



I show Fe. She lives with me, she was going to find out anyway. I'm sure she noticed its drone over the weekend, that awful persistent sound like drilling from a faraway construction site. She puts out her hand, tries to get it to warm up to her. It approaches, sort of flies back and forth between me and her, then goes back into the corner. Fe opens the blinds in my room, lets some light in. In the light I can see it better. Green and black, mostly, but its throat is white. A thin, long beak like a cherry stem. I realize I've never seen one up close before.

We watch it dart across the room and scoop up a fly mid-flight in one swift rotation of its wings. In the blink of an eye it swallows, then keeps moving.

I tell Fe, "I think I'm stuck with it. I don't know how to get rid of it. I feel pretty fucked up."

She tells me, "It's okay. Let me know if you need anything."

And I think, Help. I need Help. But I don't say that, because you don't say that. You don't say you need Help unless you know what Help you need.



A knock on my bedroom door. I've been awake for hours, too many hours, lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling where it darts between the four corners of the room, over and over again. It gets me dizzy, gets me nauseous, but there isn't enough in my stomach to let out.

I go, "Yeah?"

"Can I come in?" Fe asks as she enters. She tiptoes over to me.

"Hey, you," she says affectionately as she sits at the foot of the bed. The bird swoops down and starts circling her. She giggles.

"Hey, little guy didn't bite me today, I think he's starting to like me!"

I try to force a smile but my face feels too heavy. Fe strokes the tiny bristles of my unshaved leg.

"How about we get up and take a shower."

"I assume that by 'we', you mean me," I say with a sigh. I don't recognize my voice. I haven't heard it in days.

"I mean, you know I'd be down to shower with you, but I think your little bodyguard would fuck me up if I tried any funny stuff." She smiles and leans in toward me, trying to give me a cue to laugh. I feel my body

pull away from her. She hovers there, waiting for me to laugh like I normally would, waiting for me to be Me. I exhale through my nose, almost like a sneeze, hoping it's enough.

I lazily let my gaze drift over to the bird behind her and watch it sprint back and forth between the desk and the bed. I sigh at the pointless waste of energy. Maybe out of envy.

She just sits there, quiet. I can feel her waiting for a reaction from me, her impatience like hot steam against my skin.

Finally, she goes, "Are we ever going to talk about this? I mean, no pressure, but like..?" She gestures to me expectantly. I rack my brain for words that might satisfy her, but I come up empty. She tries again. "You know, if there's anything. That I can do, or that you want to tell me, or like—I don't know—anything. Okay?"

I nod and grunt. I can tell it's not enough for her, but it's all I can muster.

She sighs and squeezes my hand. As soon as she touches me, the bird flies over and stabs its beak deep into her ear.

"Ow! Okay, alright, easy. Little fucker."

"Sorry," I say, shooing it away.

"No worries," she says, sounding worried. "I'll leave you two alone." She winks and leaves the room.

I stay there most of the day with it. With it always. Trapped in the whirl of its wings.