

Feathers and Scales

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I AM RUNNING. I AM NOT RUNNING. There is an element of speed. The speed makes me take my steps with a sureness and purpose that is misleading. Purpose fills me; sureness does not. As I walk, I imagine the movements of air particles that swirl around and behind me with each step. The little spheres are gray and white and silver, and they are spinning—always spinning. The distance that I must travel is eaten up in what seems like a single moment. The beat of rubber touching sidewalk keeps the time, and the rubber timekeeper stops. And I stop. The element of speed remains.

There is a door in front of me, the door of a house. There is a large and solid rusty knocker on the door. I have lifted that piece of metal many times. There is also an old doorbell. The doorbell doesn't work. I know this because of the yellowed, water-stained note above the doorbell (I have read it many times). I repeat myself and lift the knocker. I repeat myself and let it fall. Even the sound of metal on metal is old.

The silence that rings out after the momentary explosion of the knocker wraps itself around the edges of the oak trunks and oak branches and my oak legs and the two beige oak columns in front of the house. It stays there awhile. I can hear something, though. It's the

sound of shallow breathing, air dragged into lungs against its will. The breathing does not belong to me. It is separate. There is an element of speed.

The silence is conquered by the barely contained chaos that opens the door. A face appears, the face of Elizabeth's mother. It is a thin face, past middle aged, but not much. Her hair is straight, short, and a sort of off yellow. It picks its own directions to grow in. She is a dancer, a dancer in a house full of dancers.

"We're busy right now," she says. I know this. "Elizabeth is too busy to see you right now," she says. I know this, too.

"I just wanted to tell her that I'm sorry," I say. She opens the door.

Inside is preparation. Someone I don't know enters from my right. I know she is a dancer, too. She is young, but older than Elizabeth. I don't notice anything about her, really. I can't. Just as fast as one person appears, so does another, and there is an audience for the show. But they are temporary. Elizabeth walks slowly from the right, where the living room is and stops in front of me. We are about four good steps from each other. She doesn't say a thing. Neither do I.

Her mother tells us not to talk too long; everyone has places to be that they are not. Everyone is late for something. The audience leaves.

My eyes are drawn to the girl in front of me. She is wearing a dull pink skirt. It is long and old. She is also wearing a buttoned blue sweater, but these things are not what my eyes are drawn to. I look at her face, that face framed in brown oak-curved hair that barely touches her shoulders. I can see the fair skin with the band of freckles that lays itself across her nose and cheeks. I can see her green eyes that are actually four colors shaped in spirals. I can see a thousand thoughts going on inside those eyes.

I take one hard step forward. My legs pull me back and up and down and sideways all at once. They don't know where to take me. I make up their mind.

"I don't like audiences," I say. (I have already seen other people and family members in the rooms to the right of us). Elizabeth tells me that we can go to the kitchen. I walk there with her. She leads.

Another moment passes as we make our way to the dull yellow room, paved in tiles. She walks in front of me, and I see her for what she is, a handful of autumn fire-colored leaves. She is bright, but belonging to another time, and born too late. If she were born in the thirty's, by the time she had grown to the age that she is now- everyone would have saw her as gorgeous, dangerously beautiful. Everything changes. She looks no different, but she is. It is rare that anyone sees her as a child of the past, as I do.

And we are in the kitchen. And she is looking at me. And I am looking back. I do not move. I am living. I am breathing. I am running. I am not running. There is an element of speed.

Elizabeth reaches for my hands. She holds them, and they let out a small exhale. And some part of me feels softness, and some part of me is warm. It is always this way. One touch, and the homeless boy, he has a home. I tell her this. She smiles. Her lungs take in the cool air of the kitchen, and she uses it to make me words.

We are talking back and forth and moving to the rhythm that our syllables make. I apologize. I tell her things, things that are jumbled. Somewhere in there, there is:

“Who will I marry? Who will I grow old with?”

Somewhere in there, there is:

“You have so many holes inside of you.”

Somewhere, I say:

“You are my best friend.”

Somewhere, she says:

“And you are mine. That's why this is so hard.”

Her hands have moved up my arms, and she is crying. The salt-water flows down her red and white cheeks, and it keeps on flowing. There is no more distance between us. She pulls me as I pull her back. We are hoping that with enough breathing, we can exhale everything. I do a better job than her. We are walking back to the door. It takes no time.

But there is a pause before she opens it. I am talking again (but I am also quiet). We have reached the period at the end of a sentence,

a very long sentence. The door opens. I move. I move. I move slowly, but with an elegance. It is one smooth turn and I am facing this girl of the past.

“Elizabeth.”

She replies, but no more words come. I am only tasting her name. She just stands there in the threshold, letting go, holding on, holding on to letting go. She just stands there and looks at me while that salt-water runs down her face and drips off her chin. She cannot stand there forever, and the door comes to a close. It is one smooth turn and I am facing the street.

A leaf falling next to me slows down. A dark red car driving down the road slows down. There is no stop sign. The songs that birds make in the oak trees slow down. And the world stops. I have succeeded. I have exhaled everything. I have exhaled time. I move in spite of it. I imagine the movements of air particles that swirl around and behind me with each step. The little spheres are gray and white and silver, and they are spinning- always spinning. I am running. I am not running. There is an element of speed.