

The Buried Bird Cannot Fly

When I first saw the body, I assumed it was just pollution. The Charles River was rarely maintained and it was common to see clothing, bags and plastic floating about. It was Henry who noticed the scarf, frayed baby blue chiffon just bobbing in the small ripples.

“Is that Lina’s scarf?” he asked, pointing.

My breathing quickened and I felt a familiar dull pain in my chest. “No, lots of people wear scarves.” My mind immediately flooded with memories. Lina and Lark, best friends forever, well only until my thirteenth birthday this year when we had our biggest argument. I swore I’d never talk to her again and I had kept that promise.

“She wasn't at school today,” Henry continued, picking a stick up off the ground. “And you know how she was, with her mother dead. If it would be anyone, it would be her.” He rolled up his pants and took off his shoes and socks, folding them neatly at the riverside.

I narrowed my eyes and picked up his clothes, laundry was expensive these days. Lina would have done that for me. In his mind, Lina was already dead the second he saw the scarf, she would be number 201 just in this past month. And statistically, he was probably right, I just didn't wanted to believe it, because I had never told her I was sorry.

“Henry, don’t go in there!” I called. “You could get swept under! Let’s just report it and they’ll come and look.” The truth was that I couldn’t bear to know if it was her. I couldn't bear the guilt that I was still holding a ridiculous grudge, that I was still jealous of her when we were supposed to be friends. I was never able to let go of a grudge, but the list of deaths that left me feeling nauseous was growing longer by the day.

“Henry, don't touch it!” I yelled again as he approached the body, trying to grab onto it with the stick.

He didn't answer me, finally catching the hem of a skirt. I studied the ground, the brick walkway, clutching his shoes to my chest. I could hear nothing but my heartbeat through my fingertips and the waves lapping at the shore. Then there was a gasp.

"Lark, it's her!" Henry screamed, his voice cracking. "Lark, it's Lina!"

I couldn't bring myself to look up, to see what he had already predicted come true and see her lifeless body floating, her dark hair fanned out in the water, like when we used to play in the lake near her house. She would just float there, all stretched out like a butterfly and we would talk about what was on the other side of that ceiling. I could never imagine it, but I always listened. If only I had continued to listen.

"Can you help me? Pull us in?" Henry asked angrily. "Can you at least look up?"

Slowly, I moved my head to meet his face and then quickly averted my eyes. I counted all 27 notches on the ceiling support beam that held up the top 20 percent of the population and the tire tracks of the city bus that no longer ran. Mechanically, my arm reached out towards Henry, a blurry kaleidoscope of lights. Four waves in the past 30 seconds, 11 weeds growing on the bricks, anything but my classmates in front of me.

He set her down in the grass and I had to look, I had to make sure. Her eyes were dilated, loud, drooping down to white cheekbones and blue lips, like that time we had Blue Moon ice cream and her whole mouth was instantly the color of blueberries. She loved blueberries, but we could only have them on special occasions, not even the Above had many of them.

"We need to bring her in," I whispered. All of my worries about homework, money and time were instantly gone.

Henry sighed. "Yeah, we do. Help me carry her?"

I put the shoes and socks down and he sat on the ground, haphazardly putting them back on.

“I’m sorry, Lina,” I whispered, looking at Henry to make sure he hadn’t heard me. If he did, he didn’t show it. “You won that argument, I never should have left the party.” He was lacing his last shoe when I patted her head. “I’ll see you soon, probably.”

“You saying goodbye?” Henry asked.

I nodded, smoothing down her bangs.

“I thought you didn’t even like her anymore,” he said with a shrug, grabbing her elbows and motioning for me to take her feet .

“I like her,” I said quickly. “And even if I didn’t like her, it’s still sad. You’re like a robot. Have you not lost anyone you cared about?” I could list people on both hands and then onto my feet.

Henry shrugged. “Too many, that’s why it’s best to move on quickly.” He shook her arms like a marionette. “Can you pick her up please? She’s heavier than she looks and I’m not dragging her, it will decrease her value.”

I bent down and grasped onto her ankles, her sopping wet, cold stockings dripping water down my hands. She was heavier than I had expected as well. We walked sideways, swinging her body between us like a hammock.

“Our class will be even smaller now,” Henry finally said after many minutes of silence. “But I guess that means a better teacher to student ratio.”

I didn't answer, just put one foot next to the other.

“What do you think of Teacher Harlan's new hair?” he said. “I mean, I know she chopped it off because she just missed the Lottery, but I think it looks cool.” He continued to talk more,

about how loud the metal ceiling was today, how the thermostat must be set higher than usual because he was hot and then about how this was only the second time he was going to the Prudential Center.

“I went there last year for my 12th birthday with my dad, I went to the Above for a week, had the badge and everything. Did you know the elevator up is in the Prudential Center? We only get some of the building before it hits the ceiling, but the ceiling just goes around it and then the building continues all the way up into the Above. It’s quite cool, if you went.”

I rolled my eyes. How could he talk about his vacation at a time like this? Listening to the statistics, since he had gone Above, he was a ticking time bomb, set to join Lina rather quickly. Once he realized I wasn’t going to say anything, he stopped talking, his lips tightly shut together.

“I’m getting tired,” I said after a while of walking. He awkwardly dropped her arms and upper body onto the middle of the path.

“Me too.”

We waited in silence. He made quick glances at me, flicking his eyes back and forth. When they finally settled, he asked slowly, “I heard you turned down your vacation chance? I know you don’t feel like talking, but it’s helpful to talk sometimes when you’re experiencing the death of a loved one.”

For a small second, he looked like he used to look before he went up there. He looked like my friend, the one who had baked me a cake using the last of his sugar, the one who had carried me to the doctor when I cut my leg open, the one who was always there for me.

“I know that line,” I said to him. It was part of a Government PSA that came on five times a day.

“But you don’t believe it.”

“Talking won’t solve all the problems in the world, but it definitely helps.”

Henry narrowed his eyes, hands on his hips and biceps bulging. “So you do believe it?”

“Sure. And yes, I turned it down. It’s just not for me.”

“But, why?”

“It’s just a tease,” I explained. “See the Sky and all the rich people, all the technology, get out of the basement for a week, and then have to come back down here? No thank you, I’d rather not know what I’m missing out on. I’ll wait until I win the Lottery.”

“Suit yourself, but it was life changing. My goal’s also to win that Lottery and be up there with my dad. I want to be able to feel the warm sun and frigid snow, not this air conditioned stuff here. I want it to be real.”

“I’ll bet.” I nudged him and picked up Lina’s feet again.

“Think about all the people who would kill for that opportunity you had! You just gave it up!” he exclaimed, shaking his head as if I had let him down.

I glared at him. “And think about all the people who have killed themselves because of that opportunity.” I wanted to say: “Think of Lina who had killed herself because of that opportunity”, but I couldn’t bring myself to form the words outside of my brain. If I went up there, I wouldn’t be able to bear coming back down here. They’d probably find me in a highway, wandered into traffic, at the foot of a capped off skyscraper, maybe floating up on the shores of a polluted lake or just dead in my house from a more traditional method.

“Come on, we need to walk faster if we want to get inside before it closes,” was all he said, picking up her wrists. “And just so we’re clear, I’m not afraid of becoming like them, there is nothing that tells me I have to kill myself.”

True, there was nothing that would tell him that, other than the voice in his head asking if the ceiling is getting lower, if there is a bit of sunlight peeking through, if that long dead tree might be coming back alive and the voice telling him that some people Above don't even believe we exist down here. After Henry came back down, he just wasn't the same. He looked lost in the city he grew up in, just staring up at that fluorescent white ceiling, spinning around until he got dizzy and laid there. Maybe nothing was telling him to kill himself now, but it would happen soon, he just had to wait.

The Prudential Center was huge, bigger than I had remembered. It's tower climbed up to the ceiling, where it was chopped off, it was just too big for the Below.

We walked into the building, partially dragging Lina's body up the escalator, one of the few that still worked in the city. Then we followed the signs to the Drop Off Room. The stark white room was completely empty, which was rare at this point.

"We have a death to report," I said quietly, peeking over the desk on my tippy toes. Henry just kicked at the desk with his muddy foot.

The bell rang and a short man stepped onto his stool, looming over me, his glasses slipping down his nose.

"A confirmed death?" he asked.

I nodded. We had learned how to check a pulse when the suicides first started happening.

"Please place the body onto the scale," he droned and I helped Henry drag Lina onto a metal platform. The red numbers shot up until they reached 99 pounds.

"I'll give you a hundred for that one," the man said, hitting a button. The red number jumped up to 100 pounds even.

“Thank you,” I said. That type of weight could get me by.

“Who is reporting the death?”

I looked at Henry and he shrugged. “You take it,” he said. “You need it more than me.”

“Thanks,” I whispered and squared my shoulders as the wall took a picture of me, long brown knotted hair sticking up and chin looking down.

“What is your name and who are you reporting?”

I took a deep breath through my nose, inhaling the lemon scented carpet cleaner and breathed out the same way, always sterile. “Lark Thomson, sir, I am reporting my friend, this is Lina Cooper. She’s twelve, almost thirteen.”

The man didn't say anything, just typed away at a computer. “Lark Thomson, age thirteen, daughter of Jim Thomson, Ceiling Worker and Mina Thomson, deceased?”

He looked back up at me and I nodded slowly, watching Henry’s face out the corner of my eye. Henry knew now that I had been lying to him about my mom. My mom wasn’t alive, she wasn’t doing my hair and cooking me dinner, she was in an urn.

“This is your second report, first report is Mina Thomson?” he confirmed.

I could feel my shoulders shaking, all the muscles in my body straightening and bending back again. “Yes, that is correct.”

Henry craned his head over to me and mouthed, “What is going on?” I couldn't meet his eyes.

The man waved us away and walked off, transferring Lina’s body to a moving conveyor belt.

Henry grabbed my arm and walked me over to the bench, sitting me down. “Lark, is he telling the truth? Your mom has been dead this whole time?”

“Yes,” I said. “I just didn’t know how to tell you guys.”

“But you lied to us. You said your mom was your best friend and that you did everything with her, but she’s dead.”

“She was my best friend,” I muttered, my spindly legs swinging back and forth. Here it was, that guilt again. *This is not your fault*, I reminded myself. That’s what the government had told me, in fact it was no one’s fault, it was just life. “She was my best friend until she died.”

I could remember that day more clearly than I could remember this morning. It was the day of the Lottery drawing last year, a few weeks after she had come back from her free trip. The Above was all she talked about and she looked as if she hadn’t slept in days. She just sat at her desk and painted. She painted skyscrapers, SkyBirds twirling in a winged formation, fluffy clouds and mountain tops with waterfalls, more things than I could even imagine. At night I would walk the halls with her blistered hand and listen to her rant about a place more magical than heaven itself. But, she didn’t win the Lottery. She put in five times the amount of tickets as everyone else and she still didn’t get it. The neighbors found her with over 100 broken bones in the front yard, barely alive but not salvageable. They provided the transportation to the Drop Off Room, but let me report the death, a small token of pity.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” Henry said quietly. “I didn’t know.”

“How could you have known? I never told you anything.” I imagined my wall sliding back up, hinging locked to the top of my skull, separating the bad memories from the good.

Sometimes she was still alive to me and sometimes she never existed at all.

Henry looked uncomfortable, grinding his sneakers together and bouncing his right knee.

“I lied too,” he said.

“About what?”

“My trip wasn’t really as great as I said it was.”

I quickly turned to face him. Now this was some news. “What was wrong with it?”

He shook his head, shifting his hand through his hair. “The Above wasn’t what was wrong. It was amazing. The Sky, it’s gorgeous. I even got to hold the SkyBirds and I was going to get a printed footprint of a lark for you, if you wanted it. I knew you’d like that.”

“Was it that you had to come back down?”

“Wasn’t even that. It was my dad. He was off, I hadn’t seen him since he’d been moved up there, so I knew things would be weird, but it was worse than I could have ever expected. He treated me like I was stupid, like I didn’t know how to act around him, around the ‘civilized people’ as he called it. In the end, I just wanted to come back down. He didn’t love me anymore.”

This wasn’t the first time I had heard about something like that. Going up there for a week changes people, but living up there forever, it rewires people.

“I’m sorry that happened, that must have been tough. What did your mom say?”

He didn’t look at me. “What she usually says: nothing. She just nods and then works overtime, like that will fix everything. Who am I kidding, I can barely afford school books.”

“Do you want to split the money then?” I asked, extending a courtesy I hoped he’d say no to.

“No, you need it more than me. I’ll get by without it for now.”

I silently thanked him.

“Lark Thomson?” the man from behind the desk asked, stepping forward again.

“Yes?”

“The girl’s identity has been confirmed as Lina Cooper. The appropriate arrangements will be made. We thank you for bringing her in and taking the initiative for disposal.” He reached forward, bending down to my height and handed me a bag with a tie on the top. “One unit per pound, so here are 100 units for you.”

My mouth opened widely and I grinned at Henry. One hundred units, that was enough to power the house for a few weeks, to turn the Dad Robot back on and not be alone anymore, to pay for my real dad to have time off to come home, and still have some to spare for my Lottery fund.

“I think I might get up there before you,” I said with a giggle. I couldn't remember when I had been this happy, when I had smiled so big without worrying about how ugly my teeth were.

Henry laughed back. “You just might.”

And then the doors flew open, voices screaming and bloody rushed in, some dragged or carried, some not even dead yet. I jumped up onto the bench and Henry ducked underneath it.

“Would you like to report a death?” the man behind the desk yelled to the sea of people, most of which had Lottery numbers printed on their necks. “We know it’s Lottery day, but please remain calm! Speak one at a time!” More workers came from behind the man and took their places behind the line of desks, trying to control the chaos.

“Today is not Lottery day!” Henry called to me.

“I don’t know!” I yelled back. The government kept the day a secret as to not cause panic before the actual Lottery, so it was hard to tell when the actual day was.

Lottery day, that’s why the streets were so empty earlier. These were the people who didn’t win. The people who knew they had less than a one percent chance at winning, and still they had hope, and because of that hope, they were dying. We were dying.

As the crowd continued to flood into the room, I saw Henry dart out from under the bench and swirl into the crowd.

“Henry!” I yelled, circling around, looking for his pressed white shirt. I saw nothing but blood and anguish. I began to crawl through the people, snatching my hands away from muddy shoes and bodies. When I stumbled out of the building, my knees were bruised and crusted with dried blood and my once covered back was now exposed. People milled about in the once empty streets and even the whine of the ceiling was drowned out by the moans of the mourning and lost children. Some stood next to the dead or sat on them in the streets, claiming their earnings. Teams of Catchers ran off in different directions to identify the dead.

And that's when I saw the body, crisp white linen face down on the concrete with footprints all down the back.

“Henry?” I asked softly, so quietly that I almost didn't hear myself. That dull ache in my chest came back, weaving through my rib cage and lacing my bones together. I saw myself running over to him over and over again, but my legs were rooted in the ground.

“Look! There's a boy there!” someone yelled from behind me. “Think he weighs about 120?”

I snapped my neck around and zeroed in on a man and woman, hair disheveled, Lottery numbers stamped on their necks. No, they couldn't have Henry.

I ran as fast as I could, diving onto Henry's back and clutching his dirty shirt. “He's mine,” I shouted, feeling a tear slide into my mouth. “I got here first, he's mine.”

The woman sighed and pointed to the left. “Leave her, there's someone over there for us.”

Slowly, I rolled off of him and laid down, hugging my arms around his neck, praying for movement, a breath of air, anything. The only things that moved were my shaking shoulders and

chattering teeth. I wished I had cared about him when I still had the time. I wished that we had continued being friends no matter how irritating he was, no matter how he was always late to our walks and how he always took the bigger half of the cupcakes we split. An annoying friend is still a friend, but now I had none. They were my hope down here and without my hope, there was nothing else to search for other than that stupid Lottery that would probably only bring disappointment. Moms don't come back to life, friends don't come back to life, no matter how much money you have.

The Catchers found me with Henry's body, curled up like a cocoon, and they asked me what happened to him. I told them he was a jumper and then got trampled, that I'd seen it happen. The guilt still crept up, but I swallowed it back down and resolved to plant another wall. Henry would have wanted this for me, he said I needed the money more than him.

I went home that day with 220 units in two bags, richer than I'd ever been. Right away, I put it all inside my hollow book, leaving the Dad Robot idle in the corner. When I turn 18, I am going to win that Lottery and see the Sky for all of them, because when I go up there, I'm not coming back down unless it is to jump.