





TOAST

Makayla Sileo

Most days Grace did not mind that her dad didn't exist. She didn't even seem to mind how her mom was pretending to be one from two states away. But today the heater broke. The house was as irritable as usual, clothed in wallpaper from the '70s, rooms swollen with knick-knacks from her grandmother's uneventful life. When her grandmother passed seven months ago, she left a void, a void that was quickly stuffed with unpaid electricity bills from a log mansion deep in a Missourian forest.

When morning awoke, Grace could see her breath. Frost licked the floorboards and her eyebrows and it was then that she wondered if her mom had told her what number to call when things broke. Grace buried herself in layers of clothing and went about her morning, assuring she wouldn't miss the bus. She flicked on the bathroom light by habit. Nothing happened. She showered in the familiar but worse cold water, shivered

Josie decides that she isn't going to start worrying about how long she's been on the train until 2:30. She had gotten on at 1:22 a.m. exactly, surprisingly punctual for the Rapid, and it should've only taken about 40 minutes to reach 79th Street. It's currently 2:24. But hey, sometimes trains are slow, or maybe there was some maintenance or something. To be honest she doesn't really know how trains are supposed to work, but maybe sometimes they just go slower to save gas, or something. There is no way she could've gotten on the wrong train, the Red Line started and ended at

225"

You said it wouldn't be useful, you did, to get a degree in underwater basket weaving. You told me, I'll never have a stable job if you get that degree! To hell with you

The second week that I went to the clinic was the first time that I saw the birds.

The mother, or what I presumed to be the mother, was holed up in the narrow hollow of the oak tree in the front of my apartment building. It was a twenty-one minute walk to the clinic. I heard the baby birds before I had even turned the corner, even stepped back a few paces so that I could see up into the tree and find out where the chirping was coming from.

It only took me a minute to realize that the birds had actually created a nest in a hollow at the bottom of the tree, not the top, like I had initially thought. This worried me. Why would they make their nest so close to the ground? What was the mother thinking? I tried not to think of the chirps as I backed away from the tree, headed down the street. I had other things to worry about.

The clinic was nothing but a whirl of death and confusion. I tried not to look into anyone's eyes as I took care of each patient, trying not to scream when a dozen more were brought in around lunchtime. I visited the same patients over and over until they weren't there anymore, and today was no different. I knew nothing about medicine and I felt like I had never done anything important in my life, but someone had to do it. Someone had to do it.

They couldn't all just die

I gently reeled back the flimsy plastic shower curtain we were using as makeshift separators for each patient, knelt as I said hello to Jon. He looked even more pale than I remembered from yesterday night; not a good sign. I really didn't have any experience, but after the first week of volunteering at the clinic, I knew more than I ever cared to. I wanted to explore queer America, and I wanted to run away from home, and I had

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-off room. He smiled at me like he was glad to see me, like he was glad to see another day. I couldn't imagine the pain he was in, though I'm pretty sure he looked the same as yesterday. That's what they always said; that it started off really bad, and then got worse, and then it just settled in, the pneumonia or bronchitis or whatever it was that targeted us. That targeted them. None of the lesbians in the clinic or the ones I knew had ever contracted anything like it. We all wore protective gear of course, whatever we could afford, whatever we could shatwh 4. (t3 (hw) k) 5.2

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 mornin

Perhaps she is foolish or perhaps Salem is more conniving than he seems to be.