

Hi. I'm Tonia Ransom, creator and executive producer of NIGHTLIGHT, a horror podcast featuring creepy tales written and performed by Black creatives from all over the world.

This week's story of birds, blood, and vengeance is such a unique and beautifully written tale, and I'm thrilled to share it with you all.

Before we get to the story, just a reminder that all episodes are brought to you by the NIGHTLIGHT Legion. Thanks to our newest members Lindsey, Brian, Jeff, Sarah C., Syd, Pierre, Jen, Sarah, delusionallycool, Jonathan, and Cory. You all have my eternal gratitude. Again, NIGHTLIGHT is 100% listener supported, so we need your help to keep bringing you new episodes. Just go to patreon.com/nightlightpod to join the NIGHTLIGHT Legion and get a shoutout on the podcast.

Now sit back, turn out the lights, and enjoy Birds by Zin E. Rocklyn, narrated by me, Tonia Ransom.

“Birds”

By

Zin E. Rocklyn

“Why do you ask for him . . . when you know he ain't coming back?”

We were sitting on the couch, white shag carpet tickling the webs of my toes and her fingertips in my hair. Her touch was like dry ice, foreign and painful, yet warm to the point of hot and I'd been so, so cold, shivers still ran through me with each stroke. Still, I kept my face fused to the wide, Black plain of her breast plate, like a tongue to the wall of a hollowed meat locker. I felt the rise and fall of her chest slow to the point of worry, my lips tingling for the feel of her suckle. I felt foolish, wanting Mama as if I were a babe. I was no more a babe than she was a mother.

“Why, Soot?” She was half-asleep and whole drunk, her words so lazy they melted into one. I shuddered, she sighed. “Why?”

I took a breath, fixed my tongue to answer, but then she pulled, her jagged nails digging deep into the forest of my kinks and she pulled hard, plucking follicles from the dry bed of my scalp and I counted each one, counted up to twenty-two and I let go of a whimper of relent.

She stopped. Carefully removed each digit, taking one, three more with those long, serrated nails. She slid out from beneath me, behind me and stood up. Without her, I slid to the worn polyester, let the cilia tickle my cheek.

“Clean up this mess,” she said, kicking over the quarter-full bottle of white wine before dragging her feet towards her room. I watched until the compressed wood shut her up for the night.

My body jerked violently in a way that I should’ve been used to as my fingertips gripped the wings of my shoulder blades. I rocked myself to sleep with a song I made to in the dark, dreaming of a sky so black, no one could see me fly.

“You don’t ask a snake why it slithers, it just does.”

I angled the throw from my hip, like how he taught me, forefinger and thumb wrapped tightly along the short edges. I wound up, then released. Watched Mama’s voice as it skipped along the brackish pond three, four times, then lost it.

“Nice toss.”

I ignored her again. My dead sister was filled with riddles and I wasn't in the solving mood. I came here for my dead Pops and got her instead. The exchange wasn't much of a consolation.

I bent over for another stone, hoping for a smoother one, maybe a pale pebble of some kind, when I saw the ivory skull of a bird instead. My hand hovered above it, the contrast of my black-brown skin to the tea-stained white fascinating me into stillness. Couldn't name the bird, but it was small. The beak was long, about an inch and a half, the upper mandible slightly hooked, nostrils like uncovered tear drops of a small giant.

“What'chu got there?”

I heard her rising from the banks and I panicked a little, swiping at the skull and shoving it deep into my hoodie pocket before her heavy, ungainly steps could close in. Her cold reached me just as I dipped again for another stone. This one was sharper than the last, oddly shaped like a broken toy badge.

I grabbed it too quick, a jagged edge digging deep and hard and fast enough to smear my blood along its face.

Reminded me of my first fuck.

She kissed her teeth and I grit my jaw.

“Makes no sense, hiding shit from me,” she said. “Just don't break it.”

And suddenly I was warm again without having known I was cold in the first place.

I was alone when I walked back through the sliding door, but the television was on full blast. Some daytime talking head was shouting affirmations of self-worth and self-preservation when I pushed the dial in, the overly made-up face collapsing into a horizontal blue pill before completely fading into a sandbag-settling silence.

To spite Mama, I walked through the white wine stain with my muddy sneakers. She wouldn't buy me new ones, despite the new year and a growth spurt, so I only hoped my sore toes found as much satisfaction in this momentary vengeance as I did. I had no idea where she or her boyfriend was, but I didn't give a shit either. A moment like this was rare and I had every intention of living in it.

I kicked off my sneakers and left them in the threshold as I pushed open the door to my room and scooted over to the table that served as my desk, my bed being my chair. I stripped off my dirty jeans and tossed them in a corner and plopped down, bare-ass, on my comforter, carefully removing the skull from its polyester and cotton blend nest.

My hand shook as I laid the bone on the peeling varnish, turning it slightly so the tiny baby-yawn eyeholes could stare at me. I stared back for a solid minute before I felt a shiver hammer its way down my back and I felt compelled to push it away. I didn't, just got up instead and pulled on a pair of sweatpants. The drawstring had to be pulled a little tighter and I was doing just that when the air shifted, fluttered really, then trickled past my left cheek.

I shut my eyes and listened to the rustling, listened as the plumage stretched to glorious lengths and heights and in that moment, I could see it, I could feel that bird gaining life and its desire for freedom.

I shouldn't have opened my eyes.

I should've let the theatre of dreams keep playing, keep going, keep projecting those pleasant beautiful images on the backs of my lids, but jealousy got the best of me. Pure envy made me open them, made me turn around to see the horror that was reality.

I didn't see much after. The plumage got in the way. So many feathers. So dark and full and opalescent as they caught every ray of sunshine that had dared to enter my tiny room.

It was upon me before I could even gasp with awe and the tinge of regret I'd known was bound to happen at the discovering of something so sacred.

The hook of the beak took my right eye first, leaving my left to watch as the baby raptor sat on my chest and opened its gullet, devouring the jelly as if it were a treat it had awaited forever.

Then it lowered itself to me, the tear-drop nostrils snorting thick spurts of air, the yawns of its eyes much larger now, like a void against yet another.

Still empty.

I joined that emptiness when the glint of the pointed beak kissed my remaining eye.

I came to with my sweatpants down to my ankles and my dead sister sitting on my bed.

“I told you not to break it,” she said.

I blinked, sat up. Scratched my inner thigh. My nails came away with blood, brown and gummy. “I didn’t.”

“Taking it is breaking it, stupid. You should’ve left it alone.”

I hated her riddles more now than in life. I wanted her to go away, but it wasn’t that simple. It never was with the roaming dead.

“I need a favour.”

“Another one.” Statement. Fact. No riddles from me.

“Yes, another one.”

“And then you’ll leave me?” She was in my room, my sacred space, the one place she was never allowed. Their rules, not mine. Yet, I was the little sister again and screaming through balled fists for her to get out.

She blew out a breath, strands of hair with curls looser than mine drifting away only to fall right back. I wondered if this would be us forever. “Even scorpions need hugs.”

“Fuck you.”

She smirked, green eyes twinkling. “I need you to tell Daddy something.”

I leaned over to my side, turf for carpet scratching my elbow, and dribbled a bit of sick. The stench filled the room quickly. I didn't think the dead could smell, but my sister's scrunched nose could've been habitual reaction. Muscle memory for disgust.

“Again, fuck you.” I didn't bother wiping my chin.

“No one else can, stupid. Not even Mama.”

“Worms must be eating that dead brain of yours. Your daddy ain't mine and he hasn't had a soft spot for Mama since he fucked her in the Caddy to make you.”

She watched me. Waiting. Like only the dead can.

So I stood and pulled up my sweatpants. My shirt was on my sister's back. I said, “He spit in my face last time I saw him. Said I favoured Mama too much. Fuck makes you think he'll let me say a word?”

Then my sister smiled and my regret returned twice-fold.

“Sometimes what you break, breaks you.”

Turns out my big sister knew exactly what she was doing, laying that bird skull on the rocky shore I visited daily. Ever since killing a baby bird nesting in my dead Pops' head, I'd been fascinated with them. I never killed another, but I'd collect their remains when I found them. Try to clean and keep them. Fail when the flies and beetles came for them, so I'd end up burying them somewhere near where Pops continues to rot in our yard.

It wasn't to see him so much as to live in the memories that still reside there. The better ones, ones like my Pops teaching me how to skip a rock so it damn-near floats to the other side some two hundred feet away and how to shoot the .45 that eventually took his life. Like picnics and quick swims cuz there's worms that'll eat your future, you stay too long. It's the warmth, you see. They seek your warmth.

Either way, that bird was my sister's pet. And her portal.

After my Pops died, I used to stare at her for hours on end, wondering why we didn't have the same café au lait skin, the same rustled curls, the same bright gem eyes. Mama took to calling me Soot. Of course, my sister was fire. I was her remnants, the waste after the beauty burned bright.

After her soulless body with a bloated empty belly washed up on that same shore some six months after she ran off, there was no flame to speak of. I didn't exist without my sister, incandescent shit or otherwise.

So it made sense that I'd have to become her to be seen.

With the weight of my sister's intentions sitting in me, I couldn't enjoy the spread of those wings as they split open my back, only the slightest twinge of discomfort registering as the ten-foot extensions lifted us up into the air. We landed on crow's feet, but walked in hers.

Her skin slipped from my frame once or twice, but settled well by the time we made it to the bottom of the winding drive. My sister was taller than me, but skinnier. Curves had no use on

a beauty like hers, so my body ate up enough for the two of us. I was used to the oddity of it all once she knocked on the bleached oak door.

My sister's smile was painful when the door opened, yet the effort was futile once the maid recognized the infamous hair and eyes. Disbelief shoved the woman backwards, her skull glancing the corner of the hallway table with enough familiarity to crack it. A bright red slash stained the eggshell wall, dotted the mirror, muddied the entrance carpet.

My sister leaned over. Squeezed those ruddy copper cheeks. "No one's gonna believe you," she said, lips brushing the maid's forced pucker. The maid whimpered, shut her eyes against the familiar words, and my sister dropped her, let her crawl for the social room where the phone sat. But my sister waited until we witnessed the hesitation in the maid's pursuit. Watched as she touched the back of her head. Smiled as it all sat on the maid's shoulders, weighing them down, hunching her back.

Satisfied, my sister went to her Daddy's study, found him standing in front of his books of law. Like the maid, he stumbled backwards when he saw her, hands scrambling for the shelves, desperate for purchase, slick with sweat. Unwieldy in their labours.

He fell hard on the flat ass my sister inherited, chapped lips parted as bursts of air wheezed past. Looked like a snake with its jaw forcibly unhinged for milking, spit for venom coating his chin.

"Daddy?" She tilted her head. My head. Our lips pouted and I stifled a giggle. For once, my sister's antics genuinely amused me. "Do you not recognize your baby girl?"

He tried, he really did. At least he looked like he wanted to try, wanted to speak and say yes, he knew her, always would know his baby girl, his little magpie, but the words wouldn't come. Not with his chest heaving the way it was, short and panicky, stumbling over itself, rippling unnaturally. His breath was trapped within, fighting to get out.

So my sister stepped forward and took one of his prized letter openers, the one with a raven as the handle, and she freed it for him.

“This little magpie just shit in your eye,” she said, real close like. Her breath smelled of smoke and marsh. His of blood and dirt.

We found the key to the little boy's room in my sister's favourite book, some such nonsense about talking woodland animals with smarts that would one day match, then surpass her own. The room itself was a no more than a cubby, yet bigger than my own, situated behind those books of law. The boy was quiet, almost expectant when we met him sitting among toys he had no interest in.

He knew her face, but smelled me and it was the only way he'd come with us. I watched him close as my sister walked through the house. He was pale, like his father, but his hair was like my sister's. His eyes looked of both.

He was nothing like me or Mama.

Daddy finally had the scion he'd wanted.

Me and the boy were halfway home when the cruiser pulled alongside us, no lights other than the bright orange of the setting sun.

He was an officer I'd been familiar with and his pale face folded in on itself when he discovered I wasn't alone. He looked to the boy, then to me, then back again before saying, "Y'all alright?" His tone was stiff, hard. Resentful of such niceties.

I could still feel my sister in me, around us, but it'd been my face he was studying. My face he'd been looking for.

I squeezed the boy's hand gently when I heard him whimper, fixed my chin. Met his cold eyes. "We're fine."

My insides turned to acid mush as he looked us over, leaning over his empty passenger side, his radio squawking gibberish he paid no mind to. He was paying me thrice fold. My eyes flickered to the gleam of his tarnished badge and dread sat like an ice block in my belly as I briefly thought of our next, inevitable encounter. When I'd be alone. Without my sister. Without my brother.

The radio squawked again, the voice behind the static demanding attention. He tilted his head and spoke, eyes on me, thin chapped lips cutting into plastic as he responded. I squeezed my legs together a little tighter, my bladder knocking to let loose. A familiar address was spat back at him, a domestic disturbance it was called. Probably not a big deal.

I felt my sister just then, rippling just below the surface of my flesh. Felt her heat, her fire, her anger. The boy snatched his hand back and it was my turn to whimper.

The cop looked at us, saw her, then nodded briefly before driving away without another word.

We were alone when we walked in through the front door. The television was still off and not one light was on. Mama decided not to bother with me and my spite lay clumped and dried on the otherwise pristine shag rug. I decided to leave it, then crouched down to unstrap the Velcro closures to the generic superhero toddler sneakers. I kicked off my own, picked him up, and turned up the heat.

I put him on the counter, where he sat perched silent, watching me move around the kitchen with big blue-green eyes and sealed ruby-red lips.

I made us fried Vienna sausages and baked beans. He ate willingly, but only if I fed him.

I felt the corner of my mouth twitch upwards as I watched his battle of wills against sleep in a warm bath. I dried his skin and oiled some warmth into his bones before slipping one of my t-shirts over his head and a pair of shorts I couldn't let go of over his bum.

Not one word slipped past the lips so much like his mama's. My sister's.

But he didn't have to as I tucked him into my bed. His little fingers gripping my wrist with the strength of soul older than both of us told me all I needed to know.

I tapped the back of his hand twice and he let go. I showered and dressed and returned to the dark room to see those eyes illuminating one corner of my bed. I slipped in next him at the edge of bed, my back to him to protect him from my desk, from that bird's skull watching us.

He slipped an arm around my middle, tapping my useless womb, and whispered, “Sting sweet, my scorpion,” and those nightlights shut tight, his soft breaths against my neck lulling me into a sleep of my own.

That night I dreamt of flying on the back of a magpie, my sister’s laughter in my ears.

END

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Audio production for this episode by me, Tonia Ransom. You can find me online @missdefying. And to thank you for listening until the end, we have a creepy fact for you.

To fly, humans would need a wingspan of about 6 meters, or 20 feet. Not only that, but the structure of our bones and muscles would have to change--particularly in our chests. There’s a reason the breast of a bird is full of delicious meat--those muscles are some of the primary ones used to support flight, so a flying human would have to have a pretty beefy chest to support those giant wings to get us off the ground. It’s a good thing you’d need enormous wings. It’s pretty hard to look graceful with chest muscles the size of a Thanksgiving turkey.

We’ll be back in 2 weeks with another episode.