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Say Goodbye, Victor Bingham

WITH A GOODBYE, HE REMEMBERED THE MUSIC.

He remembered her feet hammering, her fingers pounding. He remembered the crowd and the stage, her shroud. He remembered her sobbing as they chanted her name. *Em-my...Em-my...Em-my*. She was the girl with frizzy hair that played the piano like she had ants in her arms.

He'd named the baby robin for her, though he knew he shouldn't. Nameless goodbyes are always easier, and tussled all around now were cluttered twigs and feathers, the goodbye he never gave. A trail of it led into the woods.

Victor Bingham backed against a tree and the ground rushed to him. They shouldn't be out here, he heard Goose say beside him. Vic didn't answer. He counted instead. Thursday. Wednesday. Tuesday. Monday. Sunday. To the night he last saw her.

The robin was Emmy just like the piano player, and his phone was full of her. He reached for it in his pocket but couldn't open it, couldn't see the baby bird's mouth and beady face wrapped in fragile wings. His hand found his hacky sack instead. He squeezed until his fists were white. He remembered their smiles, their chanting, the ringing, and there was the girl on stage again, writhing like a goalpost. He remembered himself frozen in the crowd.

"We shouldn't be out here," Goose repeated.

Vic didn't care. This was his fault. "Nothing should've been out here."

"Jess is waiting, you know. Back at school."

Vic ignored him. "Maybe it flew away. You think it could've?"

"Maybe."

"Really?"

"Fuck, man, it's definitely dead."

Vic swore and staggered away. His limp leg dragged weeds, the mud *schluuped* beneath him. A voice nipped at his back, telling him he could find another pet whenever he wanted and that, hey, he still had Jesse Jam. What's so wrong with that? Now he wouldn't waste afternoons back here and miss hacky sack. Now they could race after school, get the whips and bring the girls along, tell 'em they had a meet-up planned...

Vic stopped. "What'd you say?"

"Girls love that shit, and we got the new detailing so they—"

"No, before that."

"What? About Jess? I said it's not a bad trade, man."

He was right, Vic knew. Jesse Jam had bottle legs that sent a hammer to your stomach, green eyes and little hilly dimples that grabbed you and

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didn't let go. She knew it too, the way she smirked at Vic that night at the mall, laughed and whispered and practically made him take those swigs of whiskey.

Vic and Goose found them beneath the high school's underpass just as they knew they would, handing a bottle back and forth while taking quick, pained sips. Jessie Jam wore a blue sleeveless top with her hair straightened. Her friends Magsy and Ana were with her. The other girls nudged Jess as Vic came for a kiss, and she shook her head and backed away. She'd been waiting, she said.

Vic scratched his head. "But you didn't text. You said you would."

"Don't play stupid, Vic."

He pulled out his phone and swore. There was a notification from forty-four minutes before.

"Goose told me you went looking for the bird again."

Vic looked at his best friend. Goose's eyes were pinned on Jess as she straightened her shirt across her neckline. She caught their gaze and crossed her arms, one foot stuck out admonishingly. Vic sighed. Now they'd go to lunch or bowling or a movie, something to make up for this. Everything he'd done, all that work, and for what? All he got was a dead bird.

Jesse Jam handed the bottle to her friends and stepped forward. She hugged Vic and put her hands on his shoulders. "Go home, Vic."

"Let's go to the movies." Even as he spoke, the words made Vic cringe. He was asking instead of telling and girls like Jesse Jam didn't like guys who asked. Girls like that weren't fucking no Hyundai. Vic could hear his big brother's voice in his head: *'Specially ones like that. They only fuck Bentleys.*

Jess toyed with her hair. "We're going to the mall. With Monk."

"Monk...what...why aren't we going to the movies? I got enough to get pizza after if you want."

"We're going to that new Mexican place across the street. Monk's got friends who work there and he says we can get free tacos."

"He doesn't even have a car."

Her eyes lit up. "He just got one." She pointed to a red four-door sitting frozen like a sentinel in the front office circle.

Vic squinted. "A Camry?"

"It smells so new. And it plays CDs too."

Vic had to admit that was pretty cool, yet that only made him jealous. He snatched the bottle from Ana's hand, then leaned back and felt the fire burn right through his chest. He lurched and spit some back up, then drank again until it was dripping down his chin.

After all those dates with Jess, to the movies, the basketball game, to Patty's for lunch and sprinkled sundae swirls, to last Sunday when he

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snuck into her basement to watch cartoon re-runs. What would everyone say now? He thought of the afternoons when he didn't check on Emmy, and there were all those nights thinking about the bird and the fallen nest, traces of Jess still on him, one day swimming into another...and he actually found himself concealing a smile. That was the worst part. He'd been happy with Jess. Of course he had. Even though he'd been ignoring the bird. Even though he knew he couldn't keep it up. The guilt squeezed his stomach until it hurt. He took another drink.

He asked what she meant. Jess smiled sadly and glanced at her two friends. They were enjoying this. Vic pulled Jess so close she turned away against his breath. "No one 'round here likes Monk."

Before she spoke, movement flashed. A car door shut. Someone called hello. Everyone turned. Vic backed away with a glare, felt Goose beside him, and watched Jessie Jam's new friend saunter toward them.

Monk's grin spread to his mismatched jackal eyes. His bomber jacket was crisp and his hair rolled past his ears. His black boots made him a head taller than usual. His voice was smug. "The car was getting hot."

Vic looked around, from Monk to Magsy to Ana to finally Jess, and he felt like digging a hole and disappearing. He wanted to rip his shirt, to kiss Jess, touch her, wanted to tear something apart, anything, rip the metal rod from his leg and smash someone's skull in. He wanted to find Emmy and start the whole day again. He didn't care about taking geometry again. Just start the day over, start with his aunt's chocolate chip pancakes and he'd put extra syrup on them and even kiss her goodbye. Just start it all over. Instead, he bit his lip and Jess had to break the silence. "You find the bird at least?"

Goose told them what happened. Monk laughed and so did Magsy and Ana, but Jess looked hurt. She stared at Vic.

"I didn't know." He shrugged. "I mean, figured it might've happened but I hadn't gone out in a week 'cus I never had time."

"Oh my god. I didn't realize I was competing with a bird."

"You weren't. I spent every day with you, and we always did what you wanted." Jess glared and Vic lifted a hand. He needed an excuse, but the wrong words stumbled out instead. "That's not what I meant. I mean, I... maybe it just flew away. I don't know. I wasn't trying to make you mad."

"The bird wasn't gonna make it anyway." Goose stepped forward and jingled his car keys. "Come on. I'm trying to hit that food court."

Monk laughed, nodded at Goose's boots. "You're muddy. No way." Then he herded the girls away, even Jess, though she kept an eye on Vic like a sheep seeing the sheers for the first time. Vic watched. He couldn't let her leave. He couldn't lose her. "Wait up!" He shouted. "We'll clean them off."

"You got a bird to bury, bro."

"*Fuck that.*" Vic pulled the hacky sack from his pocket. He tossed it to Monk. "Play for it then."

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Monk stopped. For a moment, it looked like he wanted to laugh. Instead, he stared at his watch, then sighed and threw it back at Vic. "I'll make it quick."

The hacky sack was hard and green and when Vic squeezed it he glanced at Goose, nodded, and they both knew. Even Jess smirked. Vic could win at this game. He was good at this game. They played this game every day after school, right here beneath the underpass, Victor Bingham and Goose and Slice and Jamie Foghron. They played for hours. They played for lunch money, for hats. They played for beer. Sometimes they didn't play for the chance to go first in the lunch line.

None of this impressed Monk, though. He tossed away his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, tightened his shoelaces. The girls spread like wolves.

Vic dropped the sack from foot to foot, over and over, until he knew he couldn't lose. His leg didn't ache anymore. It pulsed. He tapped it, over and over, pounding and pounding and pounding. He flicked the sack at Monk. The other boy caught it on his thigh, popped it to his foot, kicked it back. "Start it up."

Again and again they passed, heads down, tongues out. They switched feet when needed, arms balancing, the sack moving faster as they found the rhythm, the *scheet...scheet* faded against Goose's shouting.

Vic's mind wasn't on dead Emmy, or Jesse Jam, or school, or his brother or aunt or even his mother or father or where'd they'd gone or what new addictions they had. The rhythm came out of habit. The aching was gone and so was the ringing, and the only music came from the notes he was making.

One of the girls yelled at them to hurry up and Monk's return made Vic backpedal. He struggled on the curb, nearly lost his balance, caught it on his toe. With a flick, it went over his head. Someone yelled. Monk lunged and returned it hard off Vic's shin and when Vic hit it the ball flew away like a rocket, like it had somewhere to be, and they all watched it go, past the girls, past Monk's surprised face, past the guardrail and the gymnasium doors to finally bounce off a stone column and yes, yes! It hit the ground and the sound was sweet.

Vic didn't realize he was roaring until Goose punched his shoulder, grinning. They slapped hands and laughed, voices echoing across the schoolyard. Vic pumped his fist, not caring how he looked.

Monk watched with mild surprise. "Can't imagine what it'd look like if you won."

"What're you talking about? It's—"

"Look at that shit! The ball's way over there."

Vic didn't want to believe it, yet when he looked again his cheeks blushed. The stone column, it had been right there, hadn't it? No. *No*. He saw now that it was at least 10 feet from Monk. Had it been that far? Monk moved. Must've. Vic wiped his forearm against his mouth. "It didn't clear it." A weak reply.

"Okay, then your bird isn't dead either."

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"Run it back then if that's the way you want to be."

"Don't be a bitch, bro. You lost." Monk already had his jacket. "I'll let you know how the movie is."

Monk motioned for the girls. Magsy and Ana followed. Goose was silent. Vic turned to Jess with his hands out, expecting her to speak for him. Her eyes moved to Monk instead.

"My car's out back," Vic reminded her. "And we just got it detailed."

"I'm riding in his. Sorry. Go home, Vic."

The words punched his stomach. Vic tried to speak. Nothing came. His head was racing. He ran the back of his palm against his chin. His lips quivered. He had to throw up.

He'd done it. He'd known it wasn't real, that it was only a game, that Jess would eventually drop him. How couldn't she? She was Jesse Jam and he was Vic Bingham, the one with the ruined leg and the alcoholic parents. His friends told him, over and over, "stop obsessing" and "don't be a Hyundai" and he hadn't listened.

Vic put his head down. He heard the Camry's doors slam, the engine rev, heard them drive away. When he looked up even the dust was calm. He thought he spotted the Camry one last time, a tiny red spot dipping behind the tree line.

Goose nudged him. "Hey, you okay?"

Vic looked at the woods beyond the football field. They were quiet and still. "No one even likes Monk."

"Let's just go home, man."

"He's always with his older sister because no one likes him."

Goose pulled Vic toward the parking lot. As they walked, Vic talked right over his friend. "I don't get it it wasn't supposed to end like this you think she was lying to me the whole time? I should've texted her more I should've done more I had to do something if I didn't I'd lose her because I'm Victor Bingham and that's all I ever get and you kept saying to slow down and I couldn't I shouldn't have gone to see the bird do you think that's why she went with him do you think she planned this? I wasn't doing anything she didn't want me to do you think she got that? You think it's over? Do you? Do you? Do you?"

Goose never answered and Vic's words trailed off until he was out of breath. His head hurt. His teeth clacked. He wobbled and clenched his fists until blood rushed to his head, and then the colors jumped, flashed, changed as he let his eyes wander, to the slate-colored parking lot; to the moldy greens of the trees behind it; to the flashing, blinding white of the sky and the fading red brick covering the school. He felt like shattered glass.

Goose yelled something, pushed him, and Vic would've run had his eyes not found the fence along the football field. Something flickered. His vision strained. He blinked, again, then walked forward until yes, yes! Was it her? He saw the puffy red breast and, wouldn't you know it, it was

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watching him, big eyes dancing across the parking lot. It's tail twitched and the closer Vic got, the more sure he was.

It was a robin.

He was a dozen feet away when its chest quivered. The sound that came out was uncontrollable joy. Laughter. The bird was laughing. Vic leaned against a car and studied it. It looked at him almost sheepishly, then glanced away as if it were waiting to meet someone. Vic thought the bird looked nervous, and that made Vic relax. Despite Monk and hacky sack. Despite Jesse Jam and her friends and how they'd talk behind his back now. Despite the dead bird and that damn ringing, that singing, the piano keys pounding and little Emmy with her frizzy hair sobbing.

The bird was soot-colored and full-sized. The breast was bright and the underside light and there they were, those eyes, they looked drenched in mascara. It laughed again, louder this time.

It wasn't Emmy. That was obvious. But this felt like something, like someone he knew.

Before Jesse Jam, Vic had visited the baby robin every day. He'd peel off his yellow-stained sweater and slink through the haze of the parking lot, weaving between ruby-glazed Audis and screaming Mustangs, down the tussled cross-country path, into the woods, around a dying stream-bed littered with dulled Gatorade bottles, and there he'd find her hidden between the rocks where the sun's bite weakened, where Vic could sneak around and pick her up.

"It's only a robin."

Vic reeled.

"You can find them anywhere," she said.

"So what?" He was too loud. The bird shuffled.

"Just saying."

Victor Bingham looked at Emmy, the girl with frizzy hair that played the piano like she had ants in her arms. He heard no music. No pounding. She wasn't crying or trembling. She wore a cut-off sweatshirt with paint-stained sleeves, her hair tied tight, faded cap on her head, jeans ripped at the knees. Her fingers curled over each other like knots and they were ugly and looked like they hurt, like she wanted to hide them, wrinkled little balls of skin, like someone put them through a Panini maker and then a shredder, and despite knowing that pain and everything that came with it, Vic couldn't stop wincing. He understood. He got it. He felt his own leg.

He asked, "What's wrong with your hands?" and she said, "From the piano, duh. Why you out here watching a robin?" and he smiled.

"I guess I like birds."

Then she smiled too. "They are kind of cool."

They watched the robin until it flew away.