

CHRISTA LUBANSKI

Flitting Hope

Dwindling light flickers through the maple tree's budding green leaves, tracing hopeful shadows on the cracked sidewalk below. A house sparrow nestles above the movie theater sign, the one down on Stone Street. He ruffles his grey feathers and braces himself against the air that still carries a bite of winter's chill. His eyes open and close slowly, containing the liquid black of his eyes. Under the sparrow's nest, the sign screams a single title in green neon lights – *Star Wars 2: Attack of the Clones*.

The little wooden bench under the maple tree is occupied by a furry orange cat. She is the town's collective cat; everyone feeds her when they see her. Billy Ferguson quickly pets her light golden fur, holding the hand of his mother, Peggy Ferguson. The cat quickly gets annoyed with Billy's quick motions. She hops off the bench and pads away, towards the nursing home on Chancer Road – the residents are much gentler than children.

Billy drops Peggy's hand and runs over to a poster directly beneath the sparrow, with an image of buttery golden popcorn, rubbing his grubby hands down the sides and begging: *Mom, can we get popcorn? Please?*

Not right now, Billy. You'll spoil your dinner.

But MOM! Everyone gets popcorn at the movies!

Billy, I'm making lasagna for dinner, can't you just wait until then?

No! I want popcorn now!

The sparrow scrambles upright and hops in the air, beating his wings until he reaches the street light next to the bench. Billy stomps his feet below and begins to cry while Peggy desperately tries to calm her son, holding him firmly in her work worn hands. She leans down to look into his eyes and speaks shamefully quiet –

Fine, you can get a small thing of popcorn. But if you spoil your dinner...

No, I want a big one! Billy rips away from his mother, flinging his small arms

in the air. Thomas Greysly, an elderly man who has just recently lost his wife, walks by the scene staring at the five year old boy. Thomas shakes his head. The sparrow chirps at the old man, a greeting given every night for the past three years that Thomas had been walking this street. The sparrow reminds Thomas of his wife, Rachel, and how she spoke of sparrows as being an overlooked sort of hopefulness. She loved the common birds more than even the Blue Jays at her feeder, who chased the other birds away, and she would sketch house sparrows and finches for hours, focusing on the small variations in color that made each unique. The old man glances upwards at the sparrow, giving him a slight nod and continuing down Stone Street, leaving Peggy to spoil her child's dinner.

Ok, ok! I'll get you a big one. Just be quiet.

Billy giggles in delight, jumping up and down and running the remaining six feet to the door of the theater. Peggy looks to have aged five years just in the past minutes, her crow feet pulling her eyes backwards so it looks like her brain is suctioning them in. Slowly, she follows her son, pulling a faded wallet from her purse.

The sparrow flies back to his nest as Tommy Garrison runs up and hangs off the light pole, showing off to his new girlfriend, Beth Moore. His hands brace the pole and he is sideways for a few seconds before lightly pushing off and landing next to Beth. The sparrow listens to her laugh, enjoying the chiming sound. He tilts his head to see the light glint off Beth's red highlighted hair, golden and chocolate waves that cascade down her back. Tommy grins at her and puts his arm around her back, sliding his hand craftily down to her back pocket on her Levi's. She keeps smiling, but gives him a hard look that he laughs off.

C'mon, I'll buy you something. What do ya like? Anything your little heart desires is on me tonight, babe.

Beth has already seen this movie. On opening night, Joe Harris had asked her to come with him, and she'd agreed because she wanted to make Tommy jealous. Joe hadn't even asked her what she wanted to eat – he'd snuck in a big box of Nerds in his Jedi robe. She had been shocked that he'd known what her favorite candy was, and he'd laughed and said – *How could anyone not know? You're always chomping on them in homeroom.* She'd blushed and actually enjoyed herself.

Tonight, though, she was sure it would be the best date ever. Beth had had a crush on Tommy since the 2nd grade, and she had finally won him over. Yeah, sure, Joe was pretty hurt, but she figured he would get over it. She turned to Tommy, her eyes flashing green in the fading light.

Can I just get some Nerds? I love Nerds!

Eew, ok, but those things are gross! Are you sure you don't want real candy? Like chocolate?

Oh, sure, yeah I guess a change would be good.

Beth opens the door for Tommy as they disappear into the theater. The

sparrow settles into his nest of bramble, hair, and straws carelessly left next to the trash. He tucks his right leg artfully under his body while his other leg hangs awkwardly to the side. His left leg has been shriveled and useless since birth, but he has adjusted well. The sun rolls slowly out of sight into a burning sky of purple and red, hidden by the buildings across the street. There's a large abandoned house with the windows broken out where the orange cat lives, next to the coffee shop, *MochaLoco's*. A dark alley resides between the two buildings, containing nothing besides cigarette butts and an industrial sized green dumpster.

The street lights flicker on, glowing softly down on the now quiet street. The sparrow listens to a train in the distance, the horn announcing to all in its path that it will stop for no one. Quick footsteps cause the sparrow to turn his head to the left, down towards the direction of the trailer parks and houses on Center Street. Abby Costanza is running lightly across the street from the sparrow, wearing baggy sweatpants and a long-sleeved white tee shirt that is far too big for her. She counts her steps in her head in time to the Every Avenue song playing in her ears – *It's a long night down 95, trying to beat the sunrise, staying up all night, I'm not sleeping till I cross the state line*. Her eyes have deep circles underneath them, and she knows the feeling of staying up all night too well. The sparrow has seen her running every night for months now, even after he sees her at six in the morning before work. She chases her demons with every step she takes, embracing her love of self hatred. Miss Chantal, a voluptuous nurse at the nursing home where Abby works, seems more concerned with Abby's health than even her parents. *What, you lose another five pounds? Girl, you lose anymore and there ain't gonna be nothin' left. A man's gotta have somethin' to grab onto!* Abby shakes her head to rid herself of the conversation and pushes ahead passed the abandoned house. She's not happy yet, but she's sure that chasing this dream will eventually leave her pleasantly joyful. *Someday, someday I'll figure it out, someday somehow*. She nods at Joe Harris as she passes by him.

The sparrow stretches around to clean his feathers. His eyes are drooping, a sign that it is getting late. He can hear Joe walking across the street, scuffing his worn black Converse on the pavement. Joe is contemplating the day at school, where he had seen Tommy, his ex best friend, holding hands with and making gooey eyes to Beth. Joe can remember a time when he was happy, when his parents had been together and Tommy had been his partner in crime. That was when Joe's family had owned a real house, down on Center, right next door to Tommy. Joe and Tommy would play Jedis in the backyard until nightfall, using sticks as light sabers and jesting back and forth about whether Han had shot first. When Joe's father had lost his job as a mechanic and started drinking heavily, Joe's mom had kicked him out. Then they had lost the house and moved to the apartment above the coffee shop, and Joe had started to wear worn out clothes that didn't fit him right.

That was when Tommy had left him, too. Tommy had started to distance

himself, hanging out with Ken Chase, the local bully. At the middle school, Joe was the brunt of a lot of jokes. *Poor boy, his mom's broke ass can't even buy him clothes, bet she does drugs, you ever want meth just ask Ms Harris!* He'd heard all of these jabs walking down the hall to each class, and they followed him home every night when he tromped up the stairs to the small two bedroom apartment his family shared. Even after he got out of middle school, the jokes still followed him. He would furiously write poetry every night before bed, attempting to get his feelings of belittlement and worthlessness out. When that didn't work, he took to a more destructive habit.

Joe is walking down Stone Street with his head down and his black hood up. The street lights softly glow on him, revealing his swoosh of unkempt black hair dangling in front of his eyes. The sparrow above the movie theater watches him with partially closed eyes, catching the glint of silver from a pocket knife sticking out of the back pocket of his jeans. The shine interests the bird, and he twists his head to the side before leaping in the air to follow Joe's descent down the alley between the coffee shop and the liquor store. The unnatural shadow cast by the dumpster creates an eerie light. He lands on the gutter of *MochaLoco's*, straining in the poor light to see. There is suddenly a flash of skin as Joe rolls up his sleeve, and the sparrow sees the street light's reflection in the switchblade. Suddenly, the smell of blood reaches the sparrow, and he flies back to his nest in fear. Warily, he watches Joe walk out from the alley, who is pulling his long ripped sleeve furiously over his now bleeding arm. He breathes deeply, feeling the rush of bad feelings flowing out of his new wound. A piece of paper flutters out of his pocket, but he doesn't notice. He feels better than he did as he unlocks the door to his apartment above the coffee shop.

It is eight fifteen at night, and the movie is finally out. Peggy and Billy are the first to leave the theater and begin walking home. Billy is making light saber sounds and Peggy is asking if he is hungry for dinner.

I don't like lasagna. I want a light saber! Can I have a light saber?

Billy, I told you not to spoil your dinner! You are going to eat lasagna when we get home, and no, you cannot have a light saber, they are dangerous.

But Mom! Please!

We'll talk about it.

Beth and Tommy follow them out the door, Tommy's arm around her small frame. Beth sees the scrap of paper on the street and picks it up, reading the lines Joe had scrawled out – she would recognize that handwriting anywhere. *There are only choices, whether conscious or subconscious, that determine a person. How is it that we as humans love each other? We take the best of each other and throw it aside, deeming it hopeless. Sidelong glances, brushing fingertips, ignoring a painful truth. It's not my problem, we think, until one day we realize that we've been led astray by the cruel side of "love." We cry by ourselves and shiver in the dark, holding our bleeding arms and blemishes under the shadows and existing only in the night,*

for the light reveals too much.

The stars twinkle in the stratosphere, casting down gleaming light on the sparrow's liquid eyes.



The maple tree trembles slightly with the breeze, playing in the misty spring air. A daffodil is beginning to bud in the small flower bed in front of the coffee shop, its hopeful face sleeping in the midst of unborn petals. In his nest, the sparrow watches his street while eating a small spider that had gotten too close to his nest. Thomas Greysly is across the street, putting a coin in the newspaper box. The bird tilts his head and swallows breakfast while he watches Thomas turn back towards his house on Fox Tail Lane, to the right and up the road about a mile. He considers following the old man to keep him company when Abby Costanza steps out of the coffee shop.

The sparrow balances his weight forward, delicately balancing on his one good leg. He blinks quickly, letting the shifting morning light sweep over his tiny frame. Across the street, Abby is dipping her multigrain, no cream cheese bagel into her black coffee. She has been sitting on the little bench outside *MochaLoco's* every Monday and Friday since she'd gotten the job at the nursing home. The sparrow opens his wings and launches off of the theater sign, flitting silently across the street to land on the pedestrian crossing sign directly in front of Abby. She sits with her bagel and coffee for exactly forty five minutes, seemingly dissecting the calories into neat nibbles, and saves him her last four crumbs, as always.

The sparrow is not quite comfortable eating out of her hand yet – he is still wary of humans and their confusing ways. But Abby coos at him as he eats her crumbs off the ground.

You're a pretty little thing, aren't you little guy? Yeah? I wish I was small and carefree like you. You just get to do whatever you want, don't you? And you're so small and light I bet you can fly forever. Huh Mr. Sparrow? You like my bagel?

The sparrow looks up at her and tilts his head, enjoying her pleasant voice for a minute. The church bell down the road strikes eight, and like always, Abby Costanza is off.

I have to go to work now, but I'll see you later Mr. Sparrow. She gives him one last lingering look, then darts down the street to take care of Mrs. Winzel at the nursing home. Mrs. Winzel will call her Emily again and Abby will play along, pretending to be a girl who is not eating herself apart with her mind.

The sparrow flits down the street, past the cobblestone wall in front of the brick church and down to the High School on Center Street. There are always crumbs of leftover food behind the school for the sparrow to sift through and pick from. He stops to rest on the chain linked fence, peering through the mist to see a group of kids loitering by the door in a cloud of smoke. Beth is with

them, chattering and laughing with Tommy's arm around her shoulders. Tommy takes a drag off of his cigarette, talking loudly to Ken Chase, his best friend. They cause mischief together, from leering in the girl's bathroom to throwing rocks at the orange cat on Stone Street. The sparrow had seen them laugh once when they'd hit her, and although the bird was not fond of the cat in general, he had thought it best to avoid them from then on. He sat and waited for them to go back inside, turning his head to clean his feathers.

Dude, Mike got a sick new ride last week. His parents bought him a motorcycle for a graduation gift, and he said he'd let us ride it sometime. Ken spat after he spoke, making the sparrow twitch at the noise.

That's sick, dude! Beth, you should come! I'll take you for a ride after you take me for a ride, if ya get what I'm saying.

Beth blushes at this and punches Tommy lightly on the arm. *That does sound like fun. But motorcycles are so dangerous!*

Aw come on, you only live once! I wish my folks were cool enough to buy me a motorcycle for graduation. All I'm getting is a lame old dinner. God, they're so lame.

Yeah man, I feel ya. My old man isn't even coming to the ceremony. He told me he wouldn't come unless I got into college but man, I got other shit to do. Ken throws his cigarette butt away, towards the sparrow on the chain linked fence. The sparrow hops away, his left uselessly long claws getting snagged briefly on the fence as the smell of smoke burn his eyes, the fence making a clinking sound as the sparrow lands safely away. The three kids look towards the sound, Beth seeing the sparrow first.

It's just a little bird, you paranoid freaks. She giggles at the boys' foolishness.

That thing scared the shit out of me! Dude, let's get 'im. Ken leans down a picks up a rock.

Tommy laughs. *Yeah I guess we need some practice, don't we? It's a pretty small target though. Think you can hit it? I don't think you could hit the broad side of a barn, man!*

Oh yeah? Watch me! The sparrow tilts his head, the voices sounding unpleasant. But he doesn't want to leave without first getting his fill of nibbles.

Beth is distressed at the thought of watching a murder take place – she likes the bad ass side of Tommy but she doesn't want to see it happen. She pulls on his sleeve and looks at him with her widened green pleading eyes.

Come on Beth, loosen up. He won't hit him. Tommy smirks at Ken.

Ken draws back his arm and lets the rock fly, spiraling like a football in practice. If time were to slow down the way it does in movies, maybe the sparrow would flinch, or get his claws disengaged in time to move out of the way. But time doesn't slow down. Time stops only in the minds of the naive, and within a second's gaze, the rock connects with its target, dropping the sparrow to the ground with a small reverberating thump. Ken raises a fist in triumph. Tommy pats him on the back. Beth turns on her heel and leaves.



A nest of bramble and straws sits cozily above the sign that now reads *Spi-derman*. The superhero's poster is hung to the side of the door, next to the list of prices for popcorn and tickets. The twilight enfolds the creatures of the day and shadows the creatures of the night. In the weeks that follow, the daffodils blossom in front of the coffee shop, yellow and cheerful, and the buds on the maple tree begin to cascade from the branches. Mist shrouds the street in silence, as the sun slides softly down later and later each night, casting shadows on the movie theater.