

## FLY AWAY HOME

The kids at school ask where my daddy is and I tell them Bird is my daddy. They say he's not, he can't be, because he is black and I am white. They say who did my mama marry before she had me? I say I don't remember, and anyway Mama told me I have to be good and do what Bird says because he is my father now. They say that's not true. He's not Mama's real husband either because he can't marry Mama because she's white. So he can't be the boss of me.

Every morning when I eat my cereal, I tell Mama my stomach hurts. I'm not lying. It hurts so much, and my throat hurts too, and my cereal gets all wet and slimy. Then I don't want to eat it even though it's my favorite Sugar Crisps. Mama says I'm not sick. She says I'm a grown-up girl now, and grown-up girls aren't scared to go to second grade.

So I put on my coat and walk to school and the leaves go crunch-crunch under my shoes, and my stomach hurts, and I get there and the kids are all there with their pink faces and their mothers or fathers who walked to school with them. The mothers have big *for-real diamonds* on the finger where your husband puts your wedding ring. The fathers have red hair or blond hair and blue eyes or green eyes. And I go in by myself and sit by myself, and my stomach hurts, and when the kids ask why I don't have a daddy, I tell them I do.

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Bird loves a woman he can't make his wife. Her body is his. He can touch her skin and drive his hunger into her until her sweetness quiets him, but he can't put a ring on her finger.

He loves that woman's little girl too, the child who calls him Daddy. He loves that child's arms around his neck and her shampoo-fresh hair brushing his cheek, but he is afraid to wrap his

love around her because the world will tear it away from her, like ripping a blanket off of a sleeping baby, and she will be so cold. He can hold onto her with his arms, but those arms are too dark. She won't stay a child forever. She will grow up in her pink-and-cream-colored world, where his skin doesn't belong.

She doesn't know, yet, how cold the world is, but he does. That's why he wants to talk to his horn all the time. When he talks to his saxophone, it answers in the language that belongs just to the two of them, and the music spirals around him and carries his soul up to a place where everything is big and clear and bright. In the twist of notes, he can forget how it feels to get lost in the dark places that no warmth or light can reach.

Sometimes, though, you have to sleep. Sometimes you have to eat. Sometimes you have to make love to the woman who loves you, even though you have no right to her. In those times, when Bird has to let go of his horn, he reaches for his other friend instead.

His other friend slides under his skin through the point of a needle. Every time he lets it in, it carries him farther away. Every time, he takes longer to come back, until sometime, he might not come back at all.

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This morning, Mama says she is tired of me complaining. She says my stomach doesn't hurt and she doesn't care if I don't like school, she isn't going to say another word to me till I eat my cereal like a good girl. She says she is sick of my nonsense.

Daddy is in the other room with his saxophone. I didn't think he heard Mama, but he comes in and sits down at the table with me. His eyes look big and tired. He says, "Don't you worry, darling. Bird's going to take you to school today."

So I eat up my cereal and he helps me into my jacket. Mama stands with her arms folded, her pretty mouth tight shut, but she doesn't tell Daddy to leave me be.

We go off down the sidewalk. Daddy holds onto my hand. The leaves go crunch-crunch under our shoes.

We're almost at school when I look up and see, over the tops of the so-tall city houses, a big cloud of birds like black dots on the blue sky. There are so many I can't count them. They are flying away, moving fast like leaves when the wind blows.

I point up. Daddy stops and looks up too. He says, "It's too cold for them here. They're looking for a better home."

I feel sad that they don't want to stay, but I like to see them fly. We stand there and watch them go across the sky till they are all gone. Then Daddy walks me the rest of the way to school. This time I walk right up to the door, and I wave at the other kids, and the mothers with their *for-real diamonds*, and the fathers with their blond hair and red hair.

*See?* I say, but only inside my head. *I have a daddy. I do.*