

## You Missed It

Fiction • Maddie De Pree

Before he dreamed of the bird, Van Lovell watched TV and ate a personal pizza with ranch dressing. He called his mom, who asked about job prospects. With Van being three years out of college, she wanted him to think about a career, even though Chipotle was one of the nicer chains, and if he was happy being a line cook, she was happy for him, too. And by the way, she said, she had seen on Facebook that Haley landed a nice new job. She asked if Van had seen the nice new post. He had not.

After he hung up, Van left his dishes in the sink and took a shower. He watched an artsy porno where a lady dressed as an egg had sex with another woman while a man braided their ponytails together. When it ended, he swallowed two NyQuils, brushed his teeth, and laid down on his couch. He fidgeted. The personal pizza felt heavy in his stomach. An hour passed, then another. He folded his arms behind his head and counted various pieces of lint on the ceiling. When he still couldn't sleep, he flipped onto his side and picked at a hole in his sweatpants.

When Van finally closed his eyes, he dreamed of the bird.

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Van opened his eyes to the dream. Everything was warm and too bright, and the ground was white in all directions. There was nothing everywhere. The air smelled of wet dirt and, oddly, of popcorn. In the blank landscape, the bird was the only figure. It shuffled over to Van's side.

"You made it," the bird said.

Van blinked and looked down. "What?"

"You made it," the bird repeated. The bird was black and disproportionately large, about the size of a golden retriever, and it seemed strangely overweight. Its beak leveled with Van's pelvis, a fact that made them both uncomfortable. "Here you are."

"I guess so." Van looked around. "Where is here?"

The bird cocked its head. "Do you know that quote?"

"Which one?"

"Wherever you go, there you are."

Van nodded. The bird shifted on its feet and ruffled its wings. Some time passed, during which the bird preened and Van stuck his hands in his pockets.

"I'm sorry about the smell," the bird said, finally.

"What smell?"

"The popcorn."

Van stared at the bird. The bird stared back.

"I made it before you arrived. The popcorn, I mean."

Van said nothing.

"It's gone," the bird continued. "I mean, there's really no more. I would share otherwise. But I ate it all. I really can't share." More silence. "I hope you believe me."

"Yeah," Van said. "Yeah, I do."

Another pause, in which the bird ate loudly from a badly concealed bucket of popcorn. Van tried to check his watch, then realized the face was blank. The bird pulled its head from the bucket, burped, and looked at Van seriously through a beakful of popcorn.

"How much," it said, half-chewing, "do you remember?"

"Of what?"

The bird swallowed.

"Of Haley."

*Haley.* Van closed his eyes. He saw her finishing homework in his dorm room, sucking on a lemon slice from her drink, stepping out of his shower in a curtain of steam, shaking her hair loose in the sun, laughing over her shoulder. He saw the small of her back, the mole on her right shoulder, her feet twisted up in his bedsheets. He saw her face contorted with tears, her tiny fists flailing against his chest, ruthless and hard. His own hands, lying stupid and open in his lap. *I am so sorry.*

*Bastard. You bastard.*

"Not much," Van said.

"You are a liar," said the bird.

Van said nothing. The bird looked at him evenly.

"I'll show you something," the bird said. "It's something you'll remember."

The ground beneath them shook and gave way to memory. The whiteness dissolved and the landscape gradually swelled with the shapes and colors of a Waffle House. When all the corners had filled out, Van found himself a few booths away from himself and Haley on their first date. It was some midnight in October during their sophomore year in college. The bird produced a fresh bucket of popcorn and, with some effort, hopped into the seat opposite Van.

"Watch," it said.

Van watched. In the next booth, he and Haley were laughing together. They had met at a party earlier, and, having decided that they both preferred conversation and food, had driven to Waffle House for a meal. The two of them had just finished talking about names and family trees. Haley scraped the last bite of scrambled eggs from her plate and glanced up, sly. Van, watching the memory from the next booth, saw the look in her eyes, her half smile. It was so familiar that his stomach hurt.

"Hey," she said. "I think you're lovely. Give me the rest of your hash browns and I'll let you take me home."

She was kidding, but no joke—for they really did go back to his dorm that night, and it was the first time he thought of sex as making love instead of something quick and pale. Forever afterward, he would tell Haley that he fell in love with her that night. She never believed him.

"Shut up," she would say. "Nobody falls in love that quick."

"I do," he would reply. "I do with you."

Deep in Van's memory, the date was ending. Haley and Van walked over to the register and paid each other's checks. Van, still seated inside the Waffle House, watched them walk to his car hand-in-hand. Slowly, the memory began to disintegrate. As the colors faded and the booths melted into flatness, Van watched them laughing in the parking lot. Everything else dissipated. Their figures were the last thing to go.

The bird dug around loudly in its popcorn. It pulled its head out of the bucket, scattering crumbs. Van rubbed his temples.

"What else do you remember, Van?"

"Nothing," he lied.

"What about the night it ended?"

"Don't show me that."

The bird smirked.

"Please," Van said. "Don't show me that."

"This was the night you lost her," it said.

The ground shook again. When the memory filled out, Van felt sick. This

was his and Haley's apartment, the place they had shared just after undergrad. The memory felt reluctant. It trembled. Parts of the room were blurry, and there was a second kitchen where the bathroom should have been. Haley was pacing in front of the couch where Van sat, his head in his hands. She was scrolling through his phone, shaking her head in disbelief. On the screen were a series of text messages between him and a woman named Desi, whom he worked with at Longhorn Steakhouse.

"Four months!" Hayley yelled.

On the couch, Van said nothing. He looked at his feet and didn't move.

"Jesus," she said. She laughed. "Four months sleeping with someone else."

"It wasn't about you," Van said quietly. "I promise. It wasn't anything you did wrong."

"What the hell was it, then, Van? What was it?"

*Tell her it was insecurity, thought Van, watching his memory-self stumble through an inadequate response. Tell her it was your stupidity. Your worthlessness. Your jealousy.*

"Please," he said. He looked up at her through his hands. "Please tell me this'll be okay."

Haley snorted and turned away. She kept scrolling, came across a series of photos of his penis and some corresponding images from Desi. She held them up and smiled. "Nice," she said. Next to Van, the bird snickered. Van looked at it in disgust.

"This isn't funny."

"Yes, it is," said the bird. It gathered another beakful of popcorn, crunching loudly.

"I'm serious," Van said. "Stop being stupid. This is impossible for me."

The bird chewed and said nothing.

Standing at the edge of the memory, Van watched himself walk toward Haley with his arms open, desperate. *Please.* Haley backed away so quickly and angrily that she tripped over their coffee table and fell backwards. She screamed in frustration and began to sob. "Haley, please," Van said. His voice was breaking. "Come here. Just let me help you up." He extended his arms to her again. She scrambled away on all fours, eyes wild. She shook her head. "No," she said. "No. Get out." She was rubbing her face roughly, standing up, hugging her arms to her chest. Her face was tear-streaked, but she wasn't crying anymore. "I'm not joking. Go."

"Haley."

"No," she said. "Absolutely not. Get the fuck out of here."

Van didn't move.

"I'll mail your things to you," she said. "You need to go."

Haley slammed his phone onto the table and watched from a distance as he picked it up and returned it to his pocket. Before he left the apartment, Van crossed the room and stupidly tried to hug her. Finally, Haley flew at him, knocking her fists against his chest, kicking him away, elbowing him with as much force as she had. He bowed his head against the blows. He barely flinched.

Before Van left, he turned and looked at her. Haley glared back at him, livid. *Her eyes*, Van thought, watching the memory from behind the couch. *I forgot about the sharpness of her eyes*. She was huddled against the wall in her pajamas, red-faced, her hair wild. Her t-shirt came halfway down her thighs, and she was wearing a pair of fuzzy Halloween socks with pom-poms at the cuff. *Spooky!* It was the last time he saw her.

As the memory faded back into whiteness, Haley dissolved from the head down until only her sock feet remained. Eventually, those vanished too. Everything turned white again. Van exhaled shakily.

"Why are you showing me all this?"

"Because you still think about it," said the bird.

"Show me something else."

"There is nothing else," the bird said. "Not anything you should see."

"That's not true."

The bird shifted uncomfortably. The popcorn bucket rolled between them, empty.

"Show me the moment it would've been okay," Van said. "Show me the moment I could've saved it."

"You really want that?"

"Yeah," said Van. "I do."

For the third time, the whiteness gave way to color and sound. *I remember this*, thought Van. He and Haley were sitting outside on a coffee shop patio. It was the week after he had started sleeping with Desi, before he was racked with guilt but still knew he was doing wrong. It was a summer day, lazy with heat and sunshine, and Haley was dozing softly on his shoulder. Van stroked her hair and took a sip of his coffee. Haley lifted her head and smiled.

"I love you," she whispered. She closed her eyes and nuzzled her face into his arm. Van kissed the top of her head. The memory stopped.

"That was it," the bird said.

"What?"

The bird stared.

"I don't understand," said Van. "She's just sitting there. We were both just sitting there."

"No." The bird shook its head. "If you had told her about Desi, you could

have saved it. That was when you should've told her."

Van stared ahead blankly.

"She would've been furious," said the bird. "She would've yelled at you in front of everyone. She would've thrown your drink in your face. But in the end, it would've been okay."

Everything felt too bright. The whiteness of the ground blended with the blinding horizon and made Van feel dizzy. He closed his eyes.

"That was it," the bird repeated. "You missed it."

The bird replayed the memory, slower this time, and on a loop. Drinking the coffee. Stroking her hair. Watching her smile. Coffee. Hands. Smile. Coffee hands smile. *Coffeehandssmile*.

"That's enough," Van said. "I've seen enough."

"If you say so," said the bird. The memory paused mid-loop, and the bird pecked at its popcorn bucket. Van observed the scene, frozen in time – the sunshine, the patio, his hand resting on Haley's head. After some time, he turned back to the bird.

"How does forgiveness work?"

"Beats me," the bird said. "I used to teach math."

More time passed.

"I'm just wondering," Van said. "I was thinking—"

"No," said the bird. "It's too late."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"You want to call her," it said. "Don't."

"Why not?"

"It's too late."

"It's been two years," Van said. "It could be different. Maybe she wants to hear from me."

"She doesn't." The bird fluffed its feathers, irritated. "Trust me. It's too late."

Van inhaled and spoke again. "I just—"

At this, the bird lost its patience. It lifted off the ground for the first time, beating its wings around Van's head and neck. "It's too late!" it screeched. "Too late!" As the bird screamed, it began shrinking down to normal size, its face folding and warping in time with its wings, its voice growing shriller and shriller until it devolved into loud cawing. Van winced and covered his ears with his hands.

In the middle of its melodrama, the bird started choking on a popcorn kernel and had to return to the ground while it coughed. Its eyes bugged and spit flew from its beak as it hacked. Its eyes grew bloodshot, and the noises from its throat grew strangled and forced. Van, horrified, backed away and fainted.

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Van Lovell woke up gasping. He sprang from his couch, ran to the kitchen, and threw up his personal pizza in the sink. He paced around his apartment and gnawed at his left thumbnail, thinking. *Too late, too late!* The tastes of pizza and bile felt thick in his mouth. He brushed his teeth twice, then washed his dishes from the night before, still thinking.

Eventually, he sat down at his kitchen table with a sheet of paper and scribbled down the entire dream. He wrote about the white sky and the white ground and his sick stomach. He sketched a picture of the bird and a picture of Haley. He drew her Halloween socks and her hair in the sun. He drew the plate of scrambled eggs at Waffle House. He wrote about his guilt, his unfathomable stupidity. He wrote that he was happy about her new job. He wrote that he had never loved anyone so much. He wrote that he never would. He drew a picture of himself in the corner.

When Van finished the letter, he folded it neatly and placed it in an envelope. *To Haley*, he wrote. He washed his face and put on a fresh shirt, sprayed on some cologne. He did not care that he was late for work. Before he left, he ran his hand through his hair and took a deep breath. Then he slipped the envelope into the trash and walked out the door. •