

The Sparrow Reborn

Within the tired bones of the Manhattan relic lived only two, Amani and Nana. The apartment was a parting gift from Great Uncle Saleem who was the first of the family to migrate across the oceans to the foreign land of freedom and plastic-y hot dogs, long ago - when tales of lush greenery, and larks that blessed the skies were told of their anticipated home. But autumn browned the leaves, larks didn't exist in this region of America, and Great Uncle Saleem had died of pancreatic cancer in May. The rest of the family splintered across the states in search for better paying jobs and prettier homes, and what once sat proudly as a symbol of the family's only success, now became a house of ghosts - so empty the sound of one's footsteps would reverberate to the next afternoon. The walls sagged off-white, and Amani sometimes hoped they would cave in and swallow her up entirely, but she only did so when Nana wasn't in the room.

Amani! Yallah Amani come look and see how this bird fly!

Nana's frequent beckoning's often agitated Amani, the unnecessary hurrying even though there was never anywhere to rush to, the repetitive calling of her name even after she had replied, "Yes Nana!". However, they also comforted Amani as they acted as the only form of verification that Amani existed, no one else in the world seemed to notice her. For this, Amani always obliged to whatever absurd request Nana had for her.

Perched up against the dusty windowsill, Nana's hands clasped each other loosely behind her back, her frail frame curling inwards to accommodate her intense concentration on a particularly vibrant swallow. Two strides brought Amani directly beside her, and she too assumed the required bird-watching pose. While Nana's eyes were fixated on the dancing swallow, Amani was more intrigued with Nana, her fawn-brown eyes glossed over with attentiveness.

Amani, you're not seeing the bird, you're just looking. Imagine the lands it has seen. Much, much more than Nana will ever see. Imagine the people it has seen, the pain it has passed, the love it has witnessed.

Amani nodded, squinting her eyes to give the illusion of focus, and followed the sweeping wings of the bird across the mottled horizon. She sighed, sceptical as to whether the bird could comprehend human suffering or joy as Nana suggested.

Suddenly, the bird no longer painted the sky in graceful, sweeping motions, but rather its movement became laboured and jagged. Like an autumn leaf, the swallow fluttered to its descent and landed awkwardly behind the tree line.

'Quick Amani!', Nana urged, *'Go to it!'*

Amani grunted, wondering what her schoolmates were doing on this lovely afternoon, perhaps they went for late lunch at the mall together. She peeled away from the windowsill and made her way to the door.

Past the mirage of concrete, Amani followed the winding path towards overgrown vegetation, seemingly leaving behind industrial Manhattan and entering a new world entirely.

Cautiously, Amani took two steps into the foliage, and the deeper she explored into the terrain, the more acute her sense seem to get. A cacophony of noise - the chorus of birds, mischievous scuttling of beetles, a creek's hushed song – immersed her, until...there it was. Budding greenery cradled the tiny creature, tending to it like mother to child. Amani stepped forward, pried the fronds from the bird's delicate frame, and felt its faint heartbeat in the palm of her hands.

Ba bum, ba bum, ba bum. The rhythmic beat of its heart startled Amani.

The bird's frail body quivered and with this movement, brown feathers of a million shades refracted in the sun. Brown, the colour that Amani had once associated with the mundanity of her life suddenly burst into flames, wrapped Amani in embrace and illuminated her entirety.

She caressed the bird, urging it to get up.

"Bird! Yallah Bird come and fly", she beckoned in urgent whispers.

One wing twitched...then the next. In a matter of moments, the bird returned to its former glory and flew. Amani watched as it disappeared to nothing but a speck on the horizon, but in her ears the faint *ba bum, ba bum, ba bum* of a heartbeat remained. Turning her palms to the sky and feeling the generosity of the sun kiss her cheeks, Amani realised that the

ba bum

ba bum

ba bum

was the beating of no one's heart but her own.