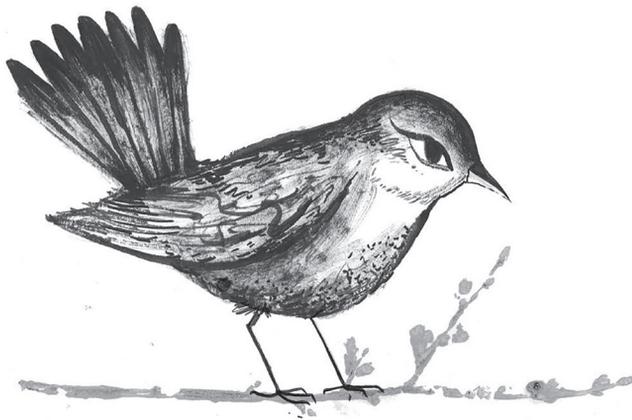




The Hunt for the Nightingale





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The Hunt for the Nightingale

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Simon & Schuster





BIRD FACT #1

Nightingales are very difficult to spot

From Rosie and Jasper's Book of Birds

My big sister Rosie says that the first thing you need to do when you're feeling lost, is get your bearings.

At first I thought this might have something to do with bears, but it doesn't. It means you have to work out where you are and try not to panic too much.





Working out where I am right now is easy, because I'm in the tree in the field behind our house. It's tall, but has branches laddering up it so we can climb really high. And there's a flat branch in the middle like a bench hanging in mid-air.

Every spring since always, Rosie and I have sat here together. And we've closed our eyes, held on tight and listened to the nightingale sing in the inky dusk – its *chutter-chatter* splattering against the dark sky like it's a page in an art book.

But the sun is all the way down now. And there's no Rosie next to me. There's no nightingale to listen to.

All I can hear is silence.





BIRD FACT #2

A group of nightingales
is called a 'watch'

'Mum? Where's Rosie?'

I call to Mum through the door of the study, and she comes out of the dark, squinting. She looks at me and rubs her eyes. 'Jasper? What are you still doing up? Go to bed, honey – your dad and I are a little busy at the moment.'

I step back, because I know I'm not supposed to





disturb them when they're working and it is past my bedtime. But they've done nothing but lock themselves in their study all week making phone calls and I don't think I can wait any more. 'This is an emergency,' I say. 'And you said I'm allowed to bother you if there's an emergency.'

Mum looks really tired, but she kneels down on the floor and takes my hand. 'Is this the missing bird again? Jasper, we've talked about this. There's nothing your dad and I can do about that. It's a wild bird and compared to everything that's happened, it's really not—'

'I know *you* can't do anything,' I say. 'But Rosie can. She was supposed to come home from university last week and help me find the nightingale. But now they're both missing.'

Mum suddenly goes as pale as a pelican. She drops my hand, but then takes a deep breath and picks it back up again, holding it tighter than before.

'I know this is really hard, Jasper.' She swallows. 'It's hard for your dad and me, too. But Rosie is . . .'

She trails off and I snatch my hand away, looking at my boots and the mud splattered up the sides. I shouldn't be wearing them in the house, but I don't think Mum's noticed. She usually cares a lot about things being neat





and clean, but this week, her hair is messy and she smells like she hasn't had a bath for a few days.

Dad comes out of the office and I see his toe poking out of his sock. 'Jasper?' he says. 'What are you doing up?'

Mum stands and whispers to him, but I hear what she says. 'It's the bird again. He wants Rosie to help him find it.'

Dad sighs for a really long time and I lift my head up to see if he's deflated like a balloon. He pinches his eyes under his glasses and then looks at me. 'Your mum and I need a bit of time to sort important things out, buddy. Maybe in a couple of weeks – after the funeral – we can help you find the Night-Tail—'

'Nightingale!' I interrupt.

Dad clenches his jaw and then the phone rings from inside the study and he jumps back inside to answer it.

I look at Mum instead. 'This is important, too.'

She smiles at me, but it's not a proper smile. 'Try not to panic, sweetheart. I know it's hard. Why don't you go read your book – take your mind off things for a while? I know your dad finds it useful to distract himself.'

'But, Mum—'

'Julia!' Dad shouts from inside the study.

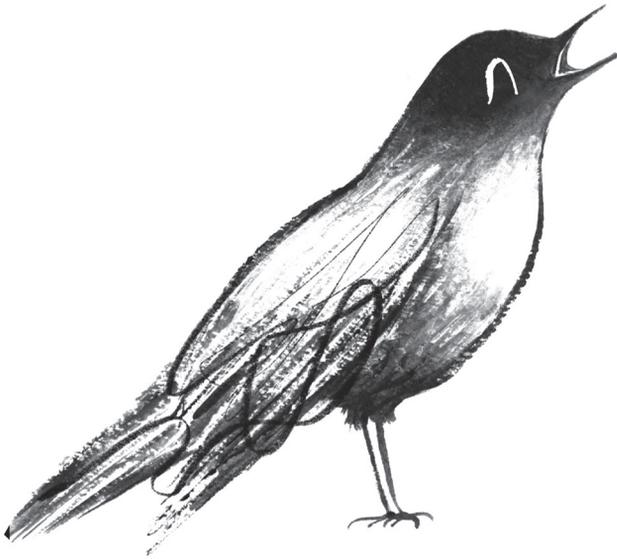




‘I’m coming!’ she calls back, before quickly combing her hand through my hair. ‘I’ll be up soon to say goodnight.’

Dad calls again and Mum sighs and shuts the door behind her.





BIRD FACT #3

Nightingale songs are made up of around two hundred different phrases

I don't like losing things. It makes my stomach hurt, and I feel dizzy and sick.

I seem to feel anxious like that more than anyone else in my school. Dad always tells me that I'm worrying over





nothing. He always says things like: ‘the other children in your class aren’t really laughing at you, Jasper,’ or that: ‘losing your homework isn’t the end of the world, you know’.

I’m not sure about that, because Rosie not being here feels like the end of everything, which is probably why I’ve felt so panicky all this week. But Mum’s right – usually I can make the panic go away by thinking about good, true things instead, like everything in our *Book of Birds*.

The *Book of Birds* is a book that Rosie and I have been writing for ages and for ever, and it has everything we know about birds in it. It’s the map of my brain, and it’s filled with feathers and facts about how to find different types of birds. And when I read it, thoughts about birds take over the worry and I don’t feel so bad any more.

There are pages and pages about the nightingale. They say that it’s a ‘migratory bird’, which means it flies away in the summer and comes back to the field behind our house every April. And even though Rosie has flown off to university now because she’s nine years older than me, she still promised to drive home every other weekend in April and May, so we could sit in our





tree together and listen to the nightingale sing, because it's important.

Two weeks ago, when the nightingale hadn't arrived like it usually does, Rosie sat with me in the dark and the silence.

'I don't like it,' I said. 'The nightingale is usually here by now, isn't it? And now it's May and we've still not heard it once.'

She held my hand in the black. 'You know, I heard there was a nightingale at the M23 motorway services? I bet that's our bird, Jasper. I bet it just got lost on its way home. A bird is only missing until you find it. And I'll find it – I promise.'

And I couldn't really see her face, but Rosie always tells the truth. So I believed her.

'I'll help you,' I said.

And she squeezed my hand, tight. 'We'll do it together, me and you. I'll come back again next weekend.'



That's what she said. She even wrote it herself in our *Book of Birds*.





*Rosie and Jasper's hunt
for the nightingale*

NEXT WEEKEND

She was supposed to come back last Friday – a whole week ago now. I kept looking at our drive after school, waiting for Rosie's rusty purple car to chug up the kerb, with its feathery seat covers and the sunshine music she always plays at full volume. But it was hard to keep a lookout, as Mum and Dad suddenly went out for a long time and left me with our granny, who lives across the road. Granny let me watch cartoons all weekend, but didn't answer any of my questions about where Mum, Dad or Rosie were and kept leaving me to go and sit in her bedroom for some reason.

Mum and Dad were gone so long that I thought maybe they'd got lost, too. And maybe they had, because when they finally came home, they looked as though they didn't know where they were. And Rosie wasn't with them.





I didn't like their expressions. They looked scared and it made me panic. They wanted to hug me and talk to me, but I couldn't listen because my stomach was hurting badly. When I feel anxious like that, the only thing that ever makes me feel like I'm not floating away on an angry, black sea – is birds.

So, while Dad cried, I thought about how nightingales fly three thousand miles to Africa every year.

And while Mum rubbed my hands between hers tightly, I thought about how common nightingales can also be found across Europe and Asia.

I felt bad about not listening properly, but I couldn't help it. I'm supposed to distract myself with nice thoughts when I feel panicky. But the only thing that was left in my head at the end was one thing Dad said:

'Rosie has gone to a Better Place.'

It should have been a nice thing to hear, but it was confusing. What place could possibly be better than sitting in our tree, listening to our nightingale? I am her Better Place.

So where is she?

I turn on my phone and dial her number again, listening to the crackle silence on the other end until her answering machine starts. And I do that again





and again, until Mum comes in to say goodnight. But maybe I'm still mad at her for talking about the nightingale like it isn't important, because I pretend to be asleep.

She sits on my bed and watches me for ages. At some point, I do such a good job of pretending that I actually do fall asleep. But when I wake up the next morning, she's gone.

I jump out of bed and run outside still in my pyjamas to check the tree again. And when I can't find Rosie in the branches, I come back to search all the rooms in the house for the millionth time. But all I find is our cat, Fish, asleep on the bathmat.

I go downstairs and jump on the sofa in the living room, so I can pull back the curtains and look on the drive for Rosie's purple car again. But all I can see is the tangled-up front garden and an empty space on the drive next to Mum and Dad's car.

Dad comes in and he's wearing his jumper inside out. He sees me looking out the window and looks sad. 'Maybe we should get you back to school . . .'

I didn't go to school all last week. Mum said I didn't need to go if I didn't want to, and I never want to, so I didn't. It did get boring though – especially because I





kept being sent to Granny's. And at her house, there was nothing to distract me from the stomach-ache feeling that something was very wrong.

'It's Saturday,' I say, sliding down the sofa.

Dad looks at his watch, surprised, and then comes to sit with me on the sofa, squeezing my shoulders really tight.

'You know your mum and I love you very much.'

I nod, because I do know that. But him saying it like that makes my heart feel fluttery for some reason, so I wiggle out of his grip and try to escape before he sees that I'm panicking again.

'Where are you going?' he calls as I get to the door.

I stop, but I don't look at him. 'I need to find out where the "Better Place" is,' I mumble.

Dad makes a strange noise in his throat. 'Probably with your silly birds, isn't it,' he says, bitterly.

I am about to argue that birds are magnificent and not silly, but then it clicks.

'Dad, you're a genius!' I leave him in the living room and run up the stairs to my bedroom, where I left our *Book of Birds*. I grab it from the bed and spin through the pages until I find it again.





Rosie and Jasper's hunt
for the nightingale

NEXT WEEKEND

Dad's right. If Rosie isn't here with me, then her Better Place must be with the nightingale. And if the nightingale is at the motorway services like she said, now I know where to find her.

She told me last weekend that something is only missing until you find it. So if I can find them both, maybe everything will go back to normal.

