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# Sparrow

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# Sparrow

## **Abstract**

My sister said she was carrying a bird inside her, a bird which would soon be drinking water out of her navel. I wasn't supposed to say anything about it. To anyone. 'I am a cage,' said my sister. 'Inside me I keep secrets, inside me I keep a bird.' And she laughed and I laughed, too. We laughed until we no longer remembered what we were laughing about. 'His name is Sparrow,' she said one day. 'He's only little now, as tiny as a seed — but he'll grow and grow, you'll see. And then I'll set him free.' She placed her hand on her stomach and her mouth curved upwards, as if she were smiling at another world in the mirror.

# Nora Nadjarian

## SPARROW\*

My sister said she was carrying a bird inside her, a bird which would soon be drinking water out of her navel. I wasn't supposed to say anything about it. To anyone.

'I am a cage,' said my sister. 'Inside me I keep secrets, inside me I keep a bird.' And she laughed and I laughed, too. We laughed until we no longer remembered what we were laughing about.

'His name is Sparrow,' she said one day. 'He's only little now, as tiny as a seed — but he'll grow and grow, you'll see. And then I'll set him free.' She placed her hand on her stomach and her mouth curved upwards, as if she were smiling at another world in the mirror.

I couldn't wait. Time was too still, it was taking too long. I squinted into the future. 'When?' I kept asking. 'When, when, when?' My sister looked luminous as she replied: 'Soon, soon, soon.' She said he was practising a song for us. 'He'll sing it so well that he will astonish us all.'

Time passed. I rode my bike and I skipped and whistled and played and waited. Sparrow was going to be my small gift for keeping my sister's secret. The air grew heady and my sister soft and heavy, like ripening fruit. When she fluttered her eyelids, I thought she was dreaming with her eyes open.

It was the longest summer. My sister turned sixteen. She wore a long, flowery dress, put her hair up in a ponytail. There were sixteen pink and red balloons bobbing around her head that hot, sticky afternoon of cake, cellophane and candles. My mother spoke loudly and happily about nothing and everything, my stepfather handed my sister the knife, helped her cut the cake. Then she said: I have an announcement to make.

And the world stops there, a sharp intake of breath.

I squint into the past now for details, terrified of what I might remember. The sky is a dazzling blue, the earth hot, sweaty. I am pregnant, says my sister. She wears a necklace of grapes with which she will feed Sparrow. She performs her own birthday song beautifully, she sings her heart out — until her throat is chalk dry and her ribcage breaks. There are feathers everywhere. I run to pick them up as the balloons pop one after the other, leaving sixteen pieces of rubbery flesh on the floor, things torn and shapeless, parts of my sister which will never again be whole.

I sit beside her and ask if it hurts. She whispers: 'Truth always hurts.' Then there is a sudden, white silence which reminds me, years later, that she is no longer here.

*\*(Highly Commended in the Seán Ó Faoláin Short Story Competition 2010).*