

THE FALLEN SPARROW

The basement room was dark at 4:48 AM, and very full. Between the insomniac in me and the fourteen half-awake, toddling baby chicks the room was very full indeed--full of chirps and cheep-cheeps and whistles and poop and God. Only I didn't realize God was there at first.

The only light came from the heat lamps strapped to two common plastic bins and the glow from the music app on my phone, as *Don't Give Up on Me* was playing in my ears. The chicks scrabbled about on food and droppings as I tried to finagle two mini-flocks off the soiled newspaper I'd forgotten to change at a holier hour. The chicks seemed to think they were the wicked and I was the final judgment, but I finally got the job done, shoving the poop clogged papers into a plastic bag.

I nearly left but stopped instead. I wasn't sure why. I was a sleep-deprived pooper-scooper, and there was nothing to keep me here. Yet a subtle feeling, distinct but light, made me want to linger. I bent and picked up a nameless chick out of the rightmost bin. The chick was sable in color, with bright, innocent black eyes staring back at mine. Holding it for a minute, I marveled at how hopelessly fragile the creature was. She would freeze to death at room temperature and choke to death in a warm car. Cradled in my hand, the chick started to close its eyes, lolling, as I became aware of a distant sound.

It was a high piping, a panicked sound, but small--very small. An unexplainable chill of alarm creeping towards horror went through me. I looked towards the white trash bag. I couldn't have. Did I?

Putting the nameless chick I held back in its bin, I bent to the plastic trash bag. I dug through the newspapers, heart pounding a little. Old feed and dried droppings scattered on my bare feet. Nothing.

Looking back in the bin, I counted six chickens in the left bin. I hadn't bought the last chickens, and couldn't remember how many there were supposed to be. Had there been seven in that bin?

I ripped my earphones out of my ears, got on my hands and knees, and forced myself to pick apart the soiled papers. Now I could hear it--a soft, lost, frightened sound. My eyes told me nothing was there. I tipped aside the last paper bunch at the bottom of the trash bag.

Tiny, white-yellow, the little creature was mournfully cheeping, too small to be heard over the noise of the other thirteen babies in the tiny room. Heartsick, I cradled the baby chick in my hands. It quieted instantly, laying its head on my thumb and closing its eyes tiredly, the warmth of its tiny body filling my cupped hands.

In my mind, I saw a very different picture. The warmth gone by dawn, snuffed. Too quiet, the baby bird buried in newspapers in the dark, chilled and weak and, if found at all, found dead. The nearness of it shocked and sickened me when I could feel the chick's throat move against my skin. I spoke to it, reminding the exhausted bird I was there, and it chirped back softly, eyes closed in trust.

Such a forgettable yellow color. Undersized. Weak.

It was at this moment, God reminded me he had been in the room the whole time. In a flash, I realized the baby chick that had been nameless among its fellows, lost through my careless error, was not nameless to its God. Christ reminded me he knew the sparrow's fall, and in this basement room, He did not let the fall go unnoticed.

For five minutes, I comforted the bird I would have killed without God's guiding hand. I had been on the cusp of leaving. It was a strange feeling, the impulse that made me stay for no reason. Once the chirping had started and I'd noticed the sound, it had been so difficult to pick it out from among the cacophony of chirps. There was no point in going through the trash a second time when I couldn't even tell if the cheeping was outside the chicken bin or not. Besides, the baby chick is easily replaceable for less than three dollars. But the sound of a lost, frightened creature is not so easily discarded.

Every time I tried to put the baby chick down, it frantically dug its head into the space between my thumb and finger, desperate for the comfort of being held and healed. I realized that I recognized the feeling, and felt it even now. A sense of comfort, of love, of tenderness that soothed me. I felt held in the hands of Someone I couldn't see, a distinct and heart-lifting feeling of being gathered safely beneath His wings even as I stood there awestruck in the dark.

I left the chick at last, snuggled to its sisters. Yet I had numbered the ninety-nine sheep this time, and I would know when the one was missing. I had felt myself being comforted as a chick in His hands, and could not forget the singular feeling. I resolved to never be too deaf or distracted to be led to a trash bag and a lost creature, feathered, human, or otherwise--especially if my mistake might have put them there.

The chirping followed me up the stairs, and into the darkness, but the sounds were no longer nameless. In truth, they never had been, and for Him, they never would be. I looked up a scripture when I reached my room as if reading it for the first time:

Luke 12:6-7: Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?... Fear not, therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.