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“X” MARKS THE SPOT

NICOLE MUSCI

You told me I looked like a bird. My wingspan stretched wide, testing the evening breeze, preparing to fly. I felt free, or almost free. Free of the noises, free of the white, free of the constant waiting and waiting for more bad news. You scared me half to death, sneaking up like you did. I know you didn't mean to, but my pounding heart didn't feel too reassured. *What are you doing?* You asked me. Your voice was quiet, but sure. I turned to look at you, my eyes meeting yours. I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want to see the look on your face. The look people get when they see someone who's dying. It's a look of pity with concern and relief that at least it isn't them. The nurses are great. They've found a way past the look. It's the friends and the family, the ones who look at you as if you're already dead and not just dying.

I asked you where you came from, though there was only one door. *The same place you did, I expect*, was what you told me pointing towards the stairwell. I told you to go back. *No*, you told me. I asked you why. I wanted to hear your answer. Wondering if you would try to tell me I had something to live for. Wondering if those words would mean more coming from a stranger. Those words never came. Why are you standing on the ledge of the roof? You stared at me. I had thought it was obvious, but you wanted to see if I could say it. So I did. I told you I was going to jump as soon as the sun set.

I expected a reaction. Something like disgust or fear. I thought you would try to talk me down, that I would hear the words “You have something to live for.” I was wrong. Again. *Why don't you jump now?* You asked me. I was surprised and almost offended. I would have been, except you were looking at me as if the answer mattered. I started to like you then, the stranger on the roof, so I told you the truth. I wanted my last view of the world to be something beautiful, not the beeping of the machines and the chemical smells. You nodded at me as if you understood. You seemed healthy to me, but that didn't mean anything. People can

look perfectly normal, as if nothing is wrong, and then all of a sudden they die.

Why are you here? I asked. *In the hospital or on the roof?* You asked. Both, I said, not realizing until then that I wanted to know both answers. You told me your little sister was sick. You told me that she had been here for three months now with nothing to show for it. You told me that you came up to the roof every night after telling her a bedtime stories. *It's too depressing with all the white,* you said. *Sterile and cold. It's too much like death.* I couldn't have agreed more. I asked you what sort of stories you told her. I was curious. *Why don't you get down off that ledge and I'll tell you,* you said. I didn't want to get off the ledge. It was the only place I felt free. But I didn't tell you this. I told you I wouldn't because I had to be ready when the sun went down. I was sticking to my plan. I needed you to know that I was sticking to my plan.

Fine, you told me, *then at least sit down. I'm tired of having to look up at you.* So, I sat. I pulled my knees into my chest facing you, but kept my feet on the initials I found. They were my "X" marks the spot. An "S" and a "Z" scratched into the cement. You cleared your throat, and leaned against the ledge. The breeze ruffled your hair as you stared out at the sky. You told me that your sister has a favorite bedtime story, one she makes you tell her every night. Don't you get sick of it? I asked. You smiled then, and turned to look at me as if I had said something funny. *No, it's a good story.* As if that explained everything. I opened my mouth to speak again, about to ask for a better answer, but you interrupted me.

You may have heard of the Arabian Nights, you said. I had. *And before you ask, yes, I tell an edited version to my little sister.* I kept my mouth shut. *It begins with the tale of Scheherazade,* you continued. *A clever woman who saved her own life every night by outwitting a king by the name of Shaharyar. He was a king among kings, but his wife was unfaithful to him. All women became untrustworthy to him because of his wife's betrayal, but the king needed a wife as all kings do.* You wiggled your eyebrows and paused dramatically. I laughed. You continued.

The king devised a plan to marry a virgin every day and then behead her the next morning so that she would never have a chance to betray him. Thousands of women died to please the king, until Scheherazade arrived. She was the daughter of the vizier and had a plan to prolong her life with the king. Before retiring for the night Scheherazade requested a favor of the king. Since it was to be her last night alive she wished to have her sister's company. The king granted the request and Scheherazade's sister was brought to them. The plan began with Scheherazade's sister requesting a story because she couldn't sleep. After getting permission from the king, Scheherazade began

the story “*The Tale of the Trader with the Jinni.*”

You stopped talking and only then did I realized night had fallen. The sun had set and the stars had begun to shine. I asked you what happened next. *I can't tell you. Time is up. You said until the sun sets, and it's dark already.* It was true. I had said until the sun sets. But it was also true that I wanted to know what happened with Scheherazade and the king. I told you I couldn't jump. I needed to know how the story ended. How does Scheherazade escape death? What is the story that she tells the king and her sister? You shrugged. *I guess you will never know,* you told me. *I can't stay up here all night telling you.* You told me you had to get back to your family. I understood that. I understood that your sister needed you, that your family needed you. I guess what I hadn't realized at the time was how much you needed them, too.

You turned away from the ledge and walked back towards the stairwell. I looked back out where the sun used to be. I didn't feel free anymore. I just felt tired. The unfinished story was nagging me and a yawn forced its way out. I got off the ledge and followed you. What if I don't jump? I asked. Can I hear the rest of the story tomorrow? You didn't stop. You didn't turn around. *Sure,* you said. *Same place, same time.* And you walked through the door.

I later asked you about that moment. Each day at sunset we met on that roof and you told me a little more of the story. Each day I asked for more. Each day you left first, never turning to see if I would follow. I knew you would always follow, was what you told me. But those were just words. You wouldn't look at me.

It was your sister who told me the truth. Why you always left first. Why you never turned around. You didn't want me to see your face. You didn't want me to see your tears as you walked away or the smile each time I asked for more. Later, I asked if this was true. Your eyes stayed on mine. *I never knew if it was the last time I would see you.* I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to tell you that you saved my life that night. I didn't know how to tell you that I began to live each day for those nights on the roof. Instead I asked for another story. •