

## The Nightingale

I sat out on my balcony and watched the stars above me twinkle through the thin clouds. I had bird seed laid out on the railing as I waited for Star to arrive. I pulled my little blanket up over my shoulders as the cool wind blew past. I heard the beautiful chirping of a nightingale as Star flew through the black sky. She landed on the rail beside me and pecked at the bird seed.

“Hey Star,” I say watching her elegant deep brown and black feathers ruffle as I speak.

“They threw me into the lockers again today.”

Star let out a shrieking chirp.

“I tried to fight them off but you know I’m a weakling,” I say pushing my glasses up on my nose.

Star chirped squeakily as if to argue with me.

“Yeah. Well they took my clothes in the locker room too. I had to go out in my towel,” I say.

She ruffled her feathers at me.

“No, they didn’t take my towel this time. There are cameras in the school now.”

She flew up a foot and landed again.

“The principal knows what they do, Star,” I say. “He just doesn’t want to do anything.”

She flew to the arm of my chair and put a claw on my hand as if to comfort me. Star was a nightingale bird but she acted like a human. It might be strange or sad, but my best friend was this little bird.

After saying goodnight to Star, I went inside and fell asleep in minutes. I woke up late the next morning and rushed to get ready for school. Luckily I didn't need to take the bus anymore. My mom bought me a camaro so I didn't have to face the bullies on the bus every day. For most people a cool car means a cool kid, but not in my case. No matter how awesome my car was, I still wasn't cool. I frequently found my car tires slashed or my windows spray painted and roof toilet papered. To them I was just a nerd. I was the smartest kid in school and I didn't go to parties where everyone did drugs and drank their lives away. I stayed home and studied. I parked in the back of the school where a camera watched everything. So they could see who destroyed my car but they didn't care apparently. The reason; I was a nobody. If I was the presidents son then the bullies would be taken care of, thrown in jail or something. The point is they wouldn't be bullying me anymore. But I'm not the presidents son, I'm a nobody. And nobody is exactly who cares about me.

"Hey looser." someone says as he pushed past me.

"High five man," someone else says as he walks toward me. "No I'm kidding." he says slapping my books out of my hands. "Nerd."

My books and papers scatter over the hall and I scramble to collect them. One boy steps on my hand and laughs, and everyone else stomps on my papers as they pass. I finally feel like abandoning my papers when a hand is held out to me. I take it and the hand helps me up.

"Thanks," I say as I dust off my jeans and then look up to see a girl holding my papers out to me. I finally realize why she helped me, she's new.

"You're new," I say taking my papers.

"I am," she says brightly.

“Well if you want to make it through this school year then I would suggest you not associate with me,” I say.

“Why not?,” she asks confused.

“I have the unfortunate role of nerdy punch bag,” I say. “But I guess someone had to fill the role. So unless you want to end up stuffed in a locker, I suggest you leave quickly to protect your new rep.”

She looks at me as she ponders the options and then smiles and flips her long hair.

“I’m Star,” she says. Immediately I look up and picture my little nightingale bird. I look her over, her long, sleek, brown hair, dark skin, full black flowing dress, and striking, dark, brown eyes that looked almost black. If I were to picture Star as a human this is exactly how she would look.

“Do I know you?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says, “And I know you, James.”

“Alright,” I say as calm as I can. “This might sound crazy... but, are you the nightingale?”

“Yes,” she says. “I’m a Nightingale Shadow. I can be a bird or a human. But that’s not what’s important here. I finally got permission to come help you.”

“Not important? I thought you were a bird... now you’re... not? And what do you mean permission to help me?” I ask.

“Nightingale Shadows are like guardian angels I guess. We aren’t allowed to show ourselves to humans unless we get permission to help them. I came to help you James,” she says.

“Help with what?” I ask.

“Deny it and I’ll peck your eyes out. You’re being bullied by just about everyone in this school and we have got to put a stop to it.” she says passionately.

“How?” I ask.

“Let’s go show me of,” she says.

“Huh?” I look at her confused.

“Pretend I’m your girlfriend or something and the guys will get jealous and the girls will get interested. That would boost your popularity,” she says.

“No it wouldn’t,” I say. “You’re the most beautiful girl I have ever seen but it wouldn’t help me.”

“James, your handsome and smart. How is that a bad thing. You have gorgeous long black hair, perfect brown eyes, high cheekbones, and perfect posture on a semi muscular body,” she says pointing at me.

“Star I’m a nerd and I always will be. I won’t change who I am for them,” I say “But it’s not me I’m worried about, it’s you. Hanging with me is a big social no no. And, Star, we’re in an all white school. When they see you, they’ll make fun of you for not being white.”

“So I’m coloured, what difference does it make?” she asks.

“To them, a big difference,” I say.

“But why aren’t you making fun of my color?” she asks.

“Well I don’t care,” I say. “You could be black, white, purple, or green. It makes no difference, your still you. Besides, I know what it feels like to be different. I wouldn’t want to make anyone feel like that.”

“Then we make everyone else think like you,” she says enlightened.

“Well that might be hard,” I say. The bell rings and I pull Star with me to class before we’re late.

When we enter the classroom all eyes go to us. A few people whisper to each other, then giggle. I shake my head and show Star to an empty seat next to me. All the seats next to me were empty so it wasn’t that hard.

“Can anyone tell me the Pythagorean theorem?” the teacher asks.

“A squared plus B squared equals C squared,” Star says.

“Correct,” the teacher says. And the comments begin.

“Look the nerd got a nerdy black girlfriend,” someone says.

“Black people must be stupid if she likes him,” someone else says.

I block out the rest of the horrible comments and watch the teacher who can clearly hear everything they’re saying. But he doesn’t do anything.

After school, Star comes with me to my car. I push the toilet paper away from my door and hop in.

“Do they do this often?” Star asks as she shakes her head at the graffiti covered car.

“Every day usually,” I say.

“And you just take it?” she says appalled.

“What else can I do?” I ask her.

“Stand up,” she says.

“I’ve tried. Remember when I came home with a black eye and broken tooth.” I say.

“Well tell someone.” she says.

“I did,” I say. “They didn’t do anything. Maybe they spoke to the bullies but clearly it

didn't work."

"Alright," she says as we pull into my driveway. "Clearly I need to confer with my highers on this. See what I can do."

"Highers?" I say with a laugh.

"I'll be back for school tomorrow," she says hoping out of the car. I watch as she takes a corner of her dress and twirls around. She's swallowed up in black fabric and the fabric is reshaped. She flies off as a bird and disappears into the sky. I blink, unbelieving, with my jaw dropped as I watch her fly away.

The next day I wake up to a little nightingale bird on my bedside table. She flies into the air with a spin that grows in shape until the human Star is standing in front of me with another long dress, this one a coco brown.

"Come on," she says. "We'll be late."

The comments were worse today. The second we walked in, the kids began calling us names. Mine was the usual nerd and looser but Star's were much worse. I didn't get pushed around today, Star did. She was the new punching bag. I tried to tell her to leave before it got worse but she refused. I didn't understand. I missed one class with Star and found her later with a split lip and bruised shoulder.

"It was just gym class," she had said. I argued that she was the one being bullied now but she didn't listen. It was as if this was her plan.

The next week I became invisible. I wasn't popular but I wasn't a nerd or looser. No one was bullying me now. They had someone else to pick on. But I couldn't take it anymore. It felt worse, knowing that Star was going through everything I went through. I never felt bad for

myself but I felt bad for her.

“This has to stop,” I say as I drive us home.

“It’s fine,” Star says through her bleeding lip and swollen jaw.

I stop the car with a jerk and look over at her. “Nothing about this is fine.”

“But your not being bullied anymore,” she says.

“No, but you are,” I say.

“I told you I would help you and I did,” she says. “I can’t just make the bullies stop bullying. But I could take their attention away from you. I made myself coloured for a reason. I knew it would take their attention away from you.”

“No,” I say loud enough to make her jump. “We are stopping these bullies. Someone must care.”

How would you get their attention?” she asks.

“If I were willing to set up a presentation in the gym, would you be able to get a few of your friends to help me out?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” Star asks.

The stage in the gym was cloaked in pure black. I wore white as I stood in center stage. Star and her other Nightingale Shadow friends were in all black, hidden in the background.

“We are here for one reason and one reason only. That reason is not to miss class. This is a serious topic that I feel the need to speak about,” I say, my voice booming through the gym. “You know me as ‘nerd’, ‘looser’, ‘gay’, and many other variations. My name isn’t ‘nerd’. Surprising I know. My name is James. I have one question for you all. You don’t have to answer of course but I would like you to. How many of you here were bullied? How many of you know

someone who was bullied?" Only a few hands go up at first. I raise my hand and a few more hands go up. "I don't think you understand how serious I am right now. I may shrug it off with sarcasm or jokes but it hurts. It really does. It's not just being shoved into lockers and being used as a punching bag. The names, the words, the jokes, everything you dismiss as 'kids being kids'" I air quote the last words and I see the principal look away. "I'm not here to lecture you. I want to show you how much 'kids being kids' can hurt. Bullying isn't a joke.

This is Star," I say as Star walks through the darkness and spins her dress to turn it white. "Star has been undercover," I say. She makes as if to wash her face and she turns her skin white. "You bullied her because she was black. don't lie to me because I know you did. You were seen, and filmed. And you knew what you were doing was wrong. Even if Star isn't really coloured, you bullied her because of it. What are you going to bully her about now?" the people look around at each other confused. "Exactly," I shout.

"This is Naomi," I say as one of Star's friends moves to the center of the stage. She too spins her black dress and turns it white. "She went to an English school and was bullied because she wasn't English. So what? If you were sent to a French or German school right now, would you like being bullied about being English. NO!" the crowd falls back in surprise.

"This is Kyle." He walks up and his black dress pants and black sleeved shirt turn white with his spin. "He went to a white English school. He's white and English. So why was he bullied? He likes guys instead of girls. And so what. I like the color blue and maybe you like the color red. I'm not going to bully you because you don't like the same color as I do. Why bully him because he isn't into the same gender as you?" I say. The crowd actually seems to consider this question.



“Jen, Josh, Tanner, Livy, Sam,” I say as each of them step up and turn their cloths white.

“Were all bullied for various reasons. But this isn’t it. There are hundreds of thousands, maybe millions more who are bullied each and every day. There are a few people I would like to speak about toady.

Kristen Joy, she was bullied for five years. Physical, and cyber bullying. Finally a message on face book was her breaking point. It read, ‘You should hang yourself you freak. Your dirty and smelly and no one likes you. Everyone would cheer when you died.’ Kristen hung herself two days later.” I had one of Star’s friends spin into a nightingale and fly off to represent a death. The crowd actually gasped and began talking. But not about the person who turned into a bird, they talked about how terrible the story was.

“Josh Dylan was bullied. They called him gay so much that he began to believe them. Finally he had had enough and took his life with a bullet,” I say, and another one turns into a nightingale and flies off. I announce four more deaths and four more birds fly off.

It’s just Star and me on the stage now. “I know I can’t stop every bully. I know most of you will forget everything I said today in a few hours. And I know that some of you will change the way you think after this. Change how you treat others. That’s what I came up here knowing. I had hoped, and I still hope, that no one here ever bullies or gets bullied again. But the truth is, that’s just not realistic. But I don’t want to loose a friend to bullying,” I say turning to Star. I take her hands then she turns into a nightingale leaving my hands outstretched and the audience in awe. “Don’t be a bully,” I say vanishing to the back of the stage. It’s silent for five minutes then a roar of cheering, clapping and stomping comes. I smile to myself and continue to the exit.

“You did it!” Star says happily when we meet up later.

"I couldn't have done it without you and your friends. Thank you," I say.

"I guess you don't need me now," she says with a sad smile.

"What do you mean?" I say. "Without you I wouldn't even be here. Not just here as in this presentation and everything. I mean here as in alive. Don't think I made it through this without thinking about taking my life. I wasn't one of the strong ones. I've thought about it. a lot. But our little night time talks got me through it. Even if you were a bird and couldn't speak. I won't let you go now. A real friend, is a friend for life."

"Really," she says.

"Of course," I say. "Besides... I couldn't live without my nightingale."

"Thank you, James," Star says. "But my job was to help you and I did. Now I have to help someone else. I was never meant to stay here, just to stop by and help."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"As a Nightingale Shadow my job is to find people in trouble and help them. Like a guardian angel. I found you and I helped you. I have to move on and help other people now. It's my job. We were meant to keep moving and keep helping," she says.

"What if you stayed and helped?" I ask.

"I don't see how else I can help you," she says.

"I want to spread the word. Do more of these presentations. Help more people and stop more bullies," I say. "I want to keep moving and helping."

"If that's how you feel," she says with a big smile, "then I have a proposal for you."

“Are you ready James?” Star calls up.

“Oh I’m ready,” I call down from the fifty meter high platform I was standing on.

“You want to help others. You want to continue to move and help. You want to be a Nightingale Shadow. James... do you swear to follow the nightingale rules, to move on and help on forever and always?” Star asks.

“I do,” I say proudly.

“Then I declare, with theses Nightingale witnesses behind me, that you, James, are now and forever a Nightingale Shadow,” Star says. “Now jump from the platform.”

“I’m trusting you on this one,” I say looking down. I shake my head and jump from the platform. I don’t feel any sensation of falling. I open my eyes to see that I’m flying. I move my arms to find them as wings. I smile, or the equivalent of a smile for a bird, and dive toward Star and the others.

“How do you feel?” she asks.

“Like helping more bully victims,” I say falling onto my human feet. “When can we start?”

“Right now,” she says. “We have an urgent bully victim to get to. He attempted suicide twice now but thought better of it and his bullies only seem to be getting worse. Come on, we have no time to loose.”

We spin into little birds, so small we seem like nothing compared to the rest of the world, and we fly off into the night.

Even a small thing can make a difference. It’s never THE END.