

Sweet as Birdsong, Soft as Moonlight

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The sun was just beginning to fade as Night carried water back from the river. These days, her back ached as she held one hand to steady the jug atop her head, the other shading her eyes from the last golden rays. She watched the dark brown earth pass beneath her sandaled feet one step at a time.

“Night, there you are!”

Even if she had not recognized the voice, Night would have recognized that smile anywhere—the way it split Lark’s face into a grin wider than her pursed lips should be capable of, the way it revealed the gap between her front teeth like a window into her joy. Lark’s smile had always been an invitation.

The jug crashed to the ground. Water spilled across the earth as Night rushed forward to embrace her girlhood friend. Her arms had dropped from her head to wrap around Lark’s waist. Neither of them minded the shattered jug— they were girls again, ignoring their mothers’ chastisement in favor of running off to play.

Little Lark was the first girl born to the village in three years. Little Night followed close behind. On her name day, the first anniversary of her birth, Little Lark was named for her skin browner than dirt, her laughter like a song, and her attempts at song frequent as laughter. Three months later, Little Night was named for her near-black skin and eyes wide, curious, and gray as the moon. The other children had all been born either a few years earlier or a few years later, but even if they hadn’t been, the girls were sure it would always have been the two of them. Little Lark would always laugh easily and sing loudly, and Little Night would always be by her side, quiet and attentive. Little Night would always have questions, and Little Lark would always set out to answer them.

From the moment they could walk, they walked together, and from the moment they could talk, they talked together. To everyone else in the village, they may have been Little Lark and Little Night, but with each other, there were no diminutives.

Night would ask, “Lark, where do wheat seeds come from?” and her friend would ask her father over dinner and report back the next day: “The kernels.” Night would ask, “Why did Giraffe move houses?” and Lark would wait till they were all hanging sheets together and repeat the question to her mother, who would say, “His mother died. You have to leave a house when your mother dies. It’s not a home anymore if she’s not there.” Night would ask, “Why is the moon always changing?” and Lark would bring her to her grandmother, who would say, “The moon is curious, but she is also shy. She turns to look at us, and then she turns away.”

But all children are curious, and Lark once had a question of her own: “Why aren’t we allowed by the river?” Night thought for a moment; her mother had always told her “You’re too small, and the river is too strong.” But what she told her friend was what she always thought when she looked out at the river from the farm on the hill: “It’s always running.” So instead, they played out by the ruins.

Four generations ago, the village by the ruins had been the city where the emperor was born, crowned, and killed. Lark’s grandmother was just a girl when the empire fell, and she could still be coaxed into telling stories about those times. Every day, the girls ran out to the ruins as soon as they finished their chores. For many months, their favorite game was to climb over the columns closest to the village. But eventually, they ran further.

Night stepped back to look at her friend. The spilled water was making mud at their feet. “How long has it been?”

“Years,” Lark laughed. “Too many years.”

Night smiled a full smile, showing her chipped front tooth. “Enough to get married?” She gestured at the woman standing off to the side, noticing her for the first time.

“Yes.” Lark turned to take her wife’s hand and pull her into the conversation. “This is Flint.”

“Lovely to meet you.” Flint’s voice was gravelly, her face all sharp angles, but her smile was warm. Night let herself be pulled into a hug.

“Do you have any children?” She looked around for someone small and loud, as she imagined Lark’s child would be.

Flint laughed, “No, no children.”

“What about you, Night?” Lark’s voice was a song.

Night smiled at her friend. “One. She reminds me of you. Come, please, meet my family!”

And she led them down the path to her farm, not the one Lark would have remembered, but the homestead she had made with her husband.

Night had been the one to suggest exploring further into the ruins. Or rather, she had asked “I wonder what else is out here?” and Lark had replied, “There’s only one way to find out,” and took off running. Night followed her, giggling. Lark cheered as she vaulted over the ruined wall of a building, and Night made to follow suit.

Her foot hooked on the low top of the wall and she crashed into the ground. Lark was already turning. “Night, you’re bleeding!”

“Where?” Night asked, but just then she started to feel it. Her nostrils clogged with blood. Lark held a hand out to help her up and as she took it, Night was horrified to notice a tiny shard of white on the ground. She tried to talk while feeling her front teeth with her tongue: “Ith my... Did I thip my tooth?”

Lark cackled, clamping her hands over her mouth too late to muffle the sound or stop the instinct. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Here, let me look.”

Night looked up at her friend with terror in her eyes. She opened her mouth.

Lark made a face.

“Lark!”

“Sorry! Yes. Yes, it’s chipped.”

Night covered her face and groaned. She had forgotten about her bloody nose until her friend nudged her arm and offered her the torn-off hem of her tunic. “For your nose.”

“Thanks.” Night sat down on the wall of her demise. Lark perched next to her. As she held the cloth to her nose, Night’s eyes wandered across the ruins she had never seen. There was the cluster of low, ruined walls they were in now, which had presumably once been a row of houses, but further back towards the sparse treeline was a standalone circle of crumbling columns. “What’s that?”

Lark followed her friend’s gaze. Just where the forest began, the circle of columns surrounded a large stone. Something was different about these ruins— the way they stood apart from the rest, there was a remnant of purposefulness about them. Wordlessly, the girls stood and looked at each other. And then they were picking their way across the field to those columns.

As they approached, Night could see that it wasn't just a stone. The rough-hewn block held the faded carvings of sheaves of wheat along its sides— and more intriguing, a deep bowl in its top. Passing through the columns, she saw a stone stool of sorts before the stone. She stepped onto it, her feet fitting into well-worn grooves on the stool's surface. She peered into the large stone bowl.

"Woah," Lark said softly. Night looked over to see her friend trailing her fingers over the carvings on the stone's surface.

"Lark, look." She pointed into the bowl, letting her fingers graze multi-colored stains on its surface. Lark, already growing tall, didn't need the stool to peer in. She gripped the edge of the bowl and pulled herself onto her tip-toes. Night watched her friend's face as she took in the stains— purple, yellow, green, brown.

"Huh," was all she said.

Hardly an hour later, the two of them were sitting cross-legged on the floor of Lark's home, waiting for her grandmother to finish her rambling advice about the best way to knead bread so that Lark could ask her a question. When she finally did, her grandmother hummed. "You girls want to know about the altar?"

"What's an altar?" Night jumped in.

Lark's grandmother was quiet a little while longer. All three of them were watching her softly wrinkled hands fold into the dough. "An altar," she began, smiling into a memory, "is a place to ask for what you want and celebrate what you have."

Every day after that, the girls could be found at that ruined altar. They tracked down the shard of Night's tooth, tossed it into the bowl, and celebrated smiles— laughing the whole time. One week it rained three days in a row, and they stomped out to the altar to scoop mud into the bowl and draw symbols in it with sticks. At the next year's harvest, they snuck off to the altar while the village's mothers cooked the Harvest Day feast, a stalk of wheat in each of their hands. They pulled the kernels off and tossed them into the bowl one by one, making up a song as they went.

When the girls were old enough to fetch water from the river, Night was afraid. Having Lark by her side was more of a comfort than her mother, whose grip was tight on Night's wrist and her warnings were harsh in her ear. *Watch your step. Straighten your back, don't let the jug fall. Slow down.* When she slipped on the slick rocks of the riverbank, pitching forward, it was Lark that caught her arm to steady her. Night fought to catch her breath, staring at the quickly-moving current. There was a chill in her bones as her mother guided her hands to dip the jug into the current. That evening, the girls snuck out to the altar later than they ever had before. Lark pulled a river rock from her pocket, placed it in the bowl, and wrapped Night in a hug.

The day Lark's grandmother died, Lark showed up outside Night's door wiping her nose and sniffing. As soon as she saw her friend, she started sobbing again. Night brought her into an embrace, letting her friend heave sobs into her shoulder. She didn't know what was wrong yet, and didn't want to ask. Instead, she took her friend's hand and led her to their altar. Lark kept her eyes on the ground the whole way there, her tears fading. She finally whispered, "Grandmother died, Night."

Night let the news hit her in waves. Cold, and out of her control. This is what she imagined it would feel like to be washed away down the river.

The girls simply stood before the altar. They didn't know what to pray for. They had been coming here for five years, and yet Night felt that they had never touched on what Lark's grandmother had meant to them.

It was about a week later that Lark's family moved away. The girls had sobbed that it wasn't fair, that they only had to leave the house, not the village, but Lark's father insisted. He had heard there was great luck to be had tree-tapping in the rich forests to the south, and a larger village as well.

So the girls were sitting at their altar, ignoring their mother's calls one last time. Night sat cross-legged in the grass, leaning her back against a column and watching Lark tear up fistfuls of grass. She looked at Lark and she knew then that she would never not know her. They were girls together. There wasn't anything either of them could become that would discount that. Even if Lark outgrew her love for baked pumpkin seeds, Night will always have known the version of her that ate them by the pound every fall. Even if Night learned to love fetching water from the river, Lark will always have been the one who held her hand to ensure she didn't slip.

So she said this out loud, because she needed Lark to hear it. "I will never not know you."

Lark replied, "And I will never not love you."

When their mothers' shouts began anew, Night stood and reached a hand out to her friend. She pulled Lark to her feet and brushed the grass off of both of their hands. As they walked back to the village together for what seemed to be the last time, there was a remarkable sense of peace. There were some tears, too, but very little grief.

Night introduced Lark and Flint to her husband, Ox, and it wasn't long before the four of them were all sharing tea together around the hearth. They got along better than Night could've ever imagined, not that she ever had. She felt a sudden swell of guilt at the thought that, for as much as she reminisced on her girlhood, she had never thought about seeing her friend again. She had only ever imagined going back to those days. They were girls together; they were never supposed to be women together.

It was five months later that Night was set upon by the terrible affliction of being a thirteen-year-old girl. The sorrow of being left behind had only increased in that time. She was sure it was hard for Lark too, but at least she was the one who left. At least she didn't have to be alone in places they used to be together. Night still had the altar, but it was different now. She rarely went to it—only when she felt the loneliness sinking in and decided she might as well let it.

She was easily annoyed by her mother these days and snapped at her frequently. Even still, Night was desperate to understand her. She was becoming conscious of the fact that she was growing up, and studied her mother in an attempt to predict who she would become. By the time she was fifteen, she was doing everything she could to correct herself away from that woman, for no reason other than that she was her mother. She wondered if this was how it was supposed to feel, growing up.

Night knew her mother like she knew how long it takes a pot to boil. It changed depending on the situation, and something was always inexplicably different when she was looking at her. Just as a watched pot never boils, a watched woman never reveals herself. The only things Night knew for certain about the woman who had raised her was that she was quick at chopping carrots and didn't like the way her daughter kneaded bread.

Night never quite made any other friends. She knew everyone in the village, and everyone in the village knew her. There was nothing more for any of them to learn. She kept to herself, kept to her quiet study of her mother, and kept checking to ensure she was becoming something good. Looking back on those years, she would not be able to help the feeling that she had been drifting away from herself.

But then she met Ox. Or rather, she had always known him, but now they talked. Night was surprised to learn how much she liked it. It had been five years since Lark left, and Night wasn't used to being talked to. But here was this boy asking her about her chipped front tooth. He had never been the most handsome, but he had a wide smile and a broad chest. She was seventeen; he would be nineteen in a few weeks when the wheat would begin to poke out of the soil. Ox listened attentively as Night told him about the altar, blinking slowly and smiling. He liked listening to her tell stories, real or made up, and would jump in with jokes that made her laugh loud. She kissed him for the first time at the Harvest Day feast, hidden behind freshly-scythed sheaves of golden wheat. A year later they were married. His steadiness complemented her loneliness. By summer Night's mother had fallen ill, and Ox began building them a new home in anticipation of what was to come. By fall, she had passed. The young couple moved into this new homestead, solemnly beginning the work of tilling new fields and warming a new hearth.

There had only ever been two people who could coax an opened-mouth smile out of Night: Lark and Ox. But when her baby girl was born, another suddenly joined the list: Sun. From the moment she knew she was pregnant, Night had worried over her baby's name day. But from the moment Sun was born, she was the happiest baby Night had ever seen. By her name day, she babbled cheerfully, laughed often, and had a halo of bright curls— it was clear what Sun's name should be.

As her daughter grew, she loved her more and more. From the pride of watching Sun take her first stumbling steps to the joy of teaching her how to hang-dry clothes, every moment was a blessing. But eventually the joy in witnessing Sun's freedom became something else. Eventually, when Night watched her daughter run off to play, a small seed of resentment took root in her gut. How unfair, she thought, that girlhood was given freely but womanhood was something to be earned. She still loved her daughter, but this only doubled the resentment. She resented herself for her resentment, and for her stupidity: in all her years spent watching her mother, Night had never divined how much she would miss her girlhood.

She thought often about Lark's grandmother, a better model for motherhood than her own had ever been. In particular, she thought about the stories she used to tell— she couldn't quite remember any of them now, but she remembered the feeling they exuded. Night felt that all along, Lark's grandmother had been trying to tell them something about loneliness, about remembrance. About womanhood, too, and how all those things are baked into one. She could never quite put it into words.

In small moments, she would miss the feel of Lark's hand on her wrist. But then she would think of the clothes to be washed and the bread to be made, and the present took precedence over the past.

When Sun woke up afraid one night and called for her mother, Night didn't know how to comfort her. She wanted Sun to know that a mother is more than just someone who keeps you fed, but she feared she wasn't good enough at proving it. All she could do was hold her daughter close and think about how long it had been since she was afraid like that. She remembered the cold dread of the river, the fear of being so small next to something you did not understand. But she had grown up, and going down to the river became something she could no longer be afraid of. When Sun whispered "Momma, how do you sleep easily?" Night didn't know how to tell her that eventually responsibility trumps fear. She just said, "Because I have things to do in the morning," and pressed a kiss to her daughter's forehead.

It was already dark by the time Sun came home. Her mother chastised her for this, saying how she should know the rules by now. Sun apologized with a roll of her eyes. She noticed the two strangers around the hearth sharing bread, mugs of tea gone cold.

“Who are you?”

“Sun! Be polite,” Night chided.

“It’s alright,” Lark laughed, “I know how it was at that age.”

Sun’s face grew hot at the thought of someone she had just met presuming to know her. She gave her mother and father a cool kiss on the forehead and announced, “I’m going to bed.”

Night turned after her. “But you haven’t had supper.”

“I ate with River.” She was already gone.

Night wasn’t used to having guests, and she wasn’t quite sure what to do. But she ensured Lark and Flint had a good meal and good conversation before making up a bed for them to stay in for the night. In a quiet moment alone with her friend, she sighed, “Don’t you miss it?”

Lark looked up from the dish she was drying. “Miss it?”

“Being girls.”

“No darling,” Lark smiled. “I only ever missed you.”

For the first time, Night couldn’t meet her friend’s eye. “Those days... my memories of them, they’re so soft and sweet. And I don’t know how to bear it, Lark. I was so afraid of leaving home, so I stayed here. You went away to a bigger town and I stayed in this one place and watched my home slip away nonetheless. And I got older, and even my body was no longer the home I remembered. The girl I was— the girls we were together— they’re gone, aren’t they?”

Lark placed her wet hand on her friend’s. “Yes, Night, I’m afraid they are. They ran into the fields to play until the sun went down. And I think now we are more like our mothers, watching them disappear, knowing we will call them back for supper... The wheat reaching up to their waists so that from afar, it looks like they’re flying into the golden day.”

The girls stood in silence for a moment.

“And we have to let them go, don’t we?”

“We have to let them go.”

Meet the piece: "Sweet as Birdsong, Soft as Moonlight" is a story primarily about female friendships. It centers two Black girls: their girlhood, womanhood, sisterhood, and motherhood. As someone who identifies as nonbinary, it's also a meditation on what it means to me to have grown up as a girl. This story is dedicated to the girls I grew up with— friends I still have and ones I've lost touch with— and the women who raised us. I wanted the setting, an agrarian village by the relatively recent ruins of an empire, to evoke a sense of growth despite pain. There is a collective trauma in this village, but life keeps going— and little girls will always find magic.