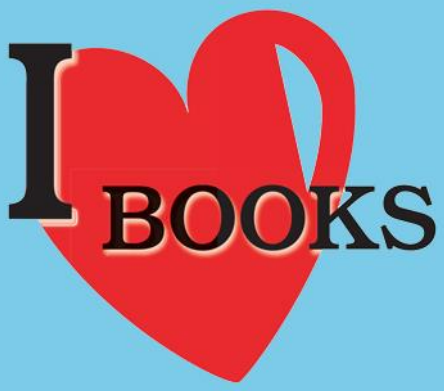


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Opening extract from

If Birds Fly Back

Written by

Carlie Sorosiak

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If Birds Fly Back

CARLIE SOROSIAK

MACMILLAN

For my parents, who said I could do anything



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Linny

1.

If you watch enough movies, it becomes pretty darn obvious when momentous things are about to happen. Classical music booms ominously like thunder. A character bites her bottom lip and gazes meaningfully into a sunset. Everything unfolds in slow motion. Occasionally, there are swans.

In real life? No swans. Just a somersaulting feeling that blooms in your belly and works its way to your hands until your fingers refuse to function as fingers. Which is exactly what's happening right now.

I blink, keep blinking, but he's still there. Álvaro Herrera. One of the most enigmatic writers in the history of cinema. His book *Midnight in Miami* inspired my all-time favorite cult film. It's even better than *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, if you can believe it. Even better than that supercool biopic about a guy who carves through mountains with spoons.

But I'm not staring at Álvaro because he's famous. I'm staring because he's supposed to be dead.

The last time anyone saw him, he was at a party in Miami's Art Deco District, and the next day – *poof!* No Álvaro. He stopped showing up for film openings, for lunches with friends. After three years, people assumed the worst.

So naturally I think I'm hallucinating, as all five foot six and potbelly of him sways unsteadily in the Silver Springs parking lot. Present-day Álvaro still looks like book jacket Álvaro: same

brown skin, same brilliant smile, same black hair fanning across his forehead like a crow's wing, except his hair's probably dyed now because he's – what? Eight-two? So old, he's even wearing those white orthopedic shoes that my grandpa used to have. Behind him is a black sedan, and he turns and raps twice on the trunk with his knuckles.

This is the perfect shot. I can tell because my shoulders are tingling (call it a sixth sense or whatever). If I panned slightly to the left, I could get everything in frame: the slanted light filtering through the palm trees, the conch-shell pink of the apartment building across the street, the supposed-to-be-dead writer knocking on the mysterious black car. Every single thing is harmonious, intriguing, *significant*. In film, most people think that the big picture is what's most important – the entire effect. But really it's the smallest details: the sparkling glint of the windshield, birds swooping in the distance, that perfect shade of pink. Pair this shot with some fast-paced guitar music, and voilà – I'd have the opening to a kick-ass documentary, something to show UCLA's admissions committee.

I should be whipping my video camera from my backpack, capturing the gravelly sound of Álvaro shifting like a shadow onto the curb. But I've found that shoving a lens into strangers' faces is a good way to scare them away. (Or to have them toss neon-blue slushies in your direction. Either one.)

And I can't afford to lose Álvaro Herrera. Not when he's about to change my life.

Ten feet away, Álvaro is pawing the air as if grasping for an invisible cane. Even from here I can smell his liberal application of aftershave. I tiptoe closer to him – one inch, two inches. The banner above our heads reads OVER THE HILL BUT NOT OUT

OF OUR HEARTS! Underneath in smaller letters: Welcome New Residents and Volunteers. He gestures to it and announces to me, '*Este lugar esta hecho una mierda*.'

'True,' I say, because this place *is* shitty. Silver Springs Retirement Community, a monstrous cement structure sandwiched between fancy condos in Miami Beach, is hardly the Ritz. Here and there are Art Deco leftovers, shards of marble and colorful geometric tiles, but most of the building's beauty has been stripped out or jackhammered away. It's what my sister, Grace, would call 'a soul-sucked place.'

More Spanish flies from Álvaro's mouth, and I hold up my hands to catch it, tell him my foreign-language skills are *así así*. Only so-so. Everyone assumes I'm Cuban or Colombian or Puerto Rican on account of my copper-brown skin and two feet of dark curls that Hula Hoop in the humidity. At least once a week I have to run through my genealogy when strangers chuck Spanish at me in the supermarket. I'll admit, sometimes it's annoying. 'My grandpa was Nigerian' doesn't immediately register in Miami Beach, where even the gas stations sell Cuban sandwiches.

'Ah, *lo siento*,' Álvaro says. He squints into the sun, woolly mammoth eyebrows blocking half of his vision. Then, for some reason, he asks my name.

'Marilyn,' I say, extending a hand like I'm on a job interview. 'Well, Linny.'

My name, chosen by my parents in a fit of nostalgia for past Christmases, when Great-Grandma Marilyn was still alive and kicking, isn't so cool for a sixteen-year-old. Forget the Marilyn Monroe connection. (My parents certainly did; why else would they've named me after a white sex symbol?) Generally speaking, 'Marilyn' is for older women with cat's-eye glasses, for

country-club goers and savings-bond buyers. Silver Springs is the first place I've volunteered where 'Marilyn' actually fits.

I prefer Linny.

'Marilyn Wellinny,' he says, as if tasting the words. There's something beautiful about the way his tongue curls around English, like it's another language altogether.

'Just Linny,' I say.

He shakes my hand back, and it's like squeezing tissue paper. 'Tell me. Shouldn't you be in school?'

'Um, it's June . . . the summer.'

He lets the words linger for a moment and then swirls his head around, double-checking the season. '*Sí*,' he says. 'So it is.'

Up close, I notice that a newly healing cut lightning-bolts above his right eye. (What's *that* from?) The rest of his face looks gooey, like it's sliding off his bones, and he has enough underarm skin to flap and fly away. His flamingo-patterned shirt is unbuttoned into an uncomfortably low V, revealing a serious tan and a sprawl of black chest hair. I wonder if he dyes that, too.

And then I wonder why I'm deeply contemplating chest hair. It's just so . . . abundant.

Focus, Linny. Focus! 'You're Álvaro Herrera,' I say.

He laughs. '*Sí*.'

'And you're going to live here?'

'*Desafortunadamente*.'

'Yes, unfortunately, but I was kind of wondering why you came back?'

He cocks his head at me, extracts a cigarillo from his chest pocket, and fumbles around for a match. 'You ask a lot of questions.'

'Oh. Sorry, yeah. Sorry. It's just —' It's just *what?* How do I even begin to explain this?

A driver steps from the mystery car, yanks a suitcase from the trunk, and walks over to us, extending an arm for Álvaro to hold. 'After you, sir,' he says.

Álvaro waves good-bye, but I follow them. *Of course* I do.

Because here's the thing: my eighteen-year-old sister, Grace, climbed out of her bedroom window five months ago, and I haven't seen her since. (There were no swans then, either; she disappeared soundlessly one night, as if slipping into a crack in the sky.) Feeling very much like an unwanted sofa left at the curb, I tried everything I could think of to reel her back: calling a hundred motels in cities where I suspected she was, tracking activity on her credit card, placing ads on missing people websites, checking and rechecking to see if she reactivated her phone plan. For three days the police shuffled in and out of Grace's room; my parents clung to each other; we're not prayer people, but we prayed.

Nothing happened.

So I started a log of people who disappeared and came back. To say I'm obsessed is like saying Martin Scorsese is *sort of* a good director (i.e. a vast understatement). I spend an unfathomable amount of time trolling the internet, collecting stories about mysterious reappearances; other people have hobbies like beach volleyball and croquet – I have movies and my *Journal of Lost and Found*. My thinking is, if I can discover why people return, then I can figure out a way to bring Grace home. But until right now, I'd never actually witnessed a person re-enter the world. More than a miracle, Álvaro feels like *my* miracle, because if he can swoop back into this life, then my sister can, too.

My sister *will*. I've never been more certain of anything.

When we were in elementary school, our friend Cass had a ginormous Map of the World rug on her bedroom floor, and every

day after class, the three of us would grab hands, close our eyes, and spin on top of it, promising that no matter where our feet eventually stopped, we would travel there together someday. Turkmenistan, Chad, the middle of the Indian Ocean – it didn't matter. Right before the spin, Grace would grip my hand extra, *extra* hard so she didn't fly away without me.

That's how I know she's coming back.

In the Silver Springs lobby, the driver politely drops the luggage with a 'You're here, *Señor*,' and Álvaro pays him with a fifty-dollar bill.

To a nurse behind the front desk, Álvaro says, *'¡Estoy aquí!'*

A purple badge on the nurse's substantial chest indicates her name is Marla, and she's Happy to Help. Her expression, puckered up like a tortoise, suggests otherwise. A few banana fritters rest half eaten near her keyboard. 'Honey,' she says. 'Ooooh no, honey. *Gracias* and *hola*'s the only Spanish I know. So let's try it in English.'

'I'm here,' he says again.

Marla says, 'All right, honey. Let me just get your welcome packet and fix you up and then we can –'

But Álvaro is already shifting away, leaving his luggage in the lobby like a stood-up prom date. A nurses' aide follows him down the hall, calling, *'Señor Herrera! SEÑOR HERRERA!'*

Marla pushes back her chair, revealing her yoga-ball girth, and peers at me over the desk. Sugary fritter residue glistens on her fingers as she licks them one by one in between. 'Can . . . I . . . help . . . you?'

Oh, right. Me. Probably acting extremely suspicious here. I tug at my white T-shirt. 'Yeah, please. I'm one of the new volunteers. Linny Carson.'

'Ah!' she says, friendlier. 'Got us another high school do-gooder! Lord, I can't believe it's that time of year already!' Grabbing a clipboard, she flips through a numbered list. 'I've got a Marilyn Carson here. That you, honey?'

I nod reluctantly, craning my neck around the corner. Did Álvaro make a left or a right?

'You overachiever beavers put me to shame!' Marla howls. 'When I was y'all's age, growing up in Georgia, we just hung out at the beach.' She tells me to leave my backpack behind her desk and then makes a 'follow me' motion. I trail behind the twitch of her butt cheeks.

Silver Springs is laid out like an octopus: a gigantic midsection with corridors like tentacles. The hallways are cramped, claustrophobic, and confusing. I keep hoping that Álvaro Herrera will pop out somewhere, lost, asking for a map, but I only see four or five residents. As if on cue, Marla says, 'Most of them are baking by the pool like chickens. Days like this, we herd them out there. Get some sunshine in their veins!' She pulls at her chest. 'These scrubs do not breathe! I'm sweating. You sweating?'

I have a near-constant stream trickling between my boobs. The summer's already the kind of hot that makes a nudist colony seem mildly appealing. *It's Florida*, I want to tell her. *Everyone's sweating*.

A gust of scorched air smacks our faces as we step into the courtyard, where at least a hundred residents are sprinkled across the concrete. Ever seen *Birdman of Alcatraz*? Somehow Silver Springs reminds me of a prison movie. There's a pool, but no one's swimming. On the back wall is a faded mural of the ocean, and I can't help but wonder: *When was the last time these people saw the* real *beach?* It's only two blocks away.

Marla says that for the next three hours I'm to introduce myself around the courtyard and 'make friends.' Handing me a sticky 'I Am a Volunteer' badge, she adds, 'My fritters are getting cold. You all right here?'

Am I? I vaguely nod, although all I can think about are the residents dead asleep in the courtyard. Mummifying in the sun. They are left-behinds, just like me. Their children – maybe their grandchildren, or their partners – have stuck them here and skipped off to better things.

When it comes to movies, I'm drawn to drama like this (complications, grittiness, imperfect relationships), but in real life, these things are far from stellar. I didn't fully understand that until dysfunction found my family, tapping us on the shoulders and dumping a bundle of grief into our laps.

Hey, wait a second.

The Left-Behinds. That's actually a decent title for my screenplay. I started it a few months ago – to process what happened to my family, what happened to Grace, what's still happening to me. Okay, this might sound a little hokey, but ever since my sister disappeared, I've been living in black and white. Full-on classic movie without any of the good bits. It's the sad channel, twenty-four seven.

I'm convinced that when Grace left, she dragged all the color with her.

I'm convinced that Álvaro's going to help me get it back.

THE LEFT-BEHINDS (scene 1)

Open on:

GRACE'S BEDROOM – LATE EVENING

The room is bright and remarkably colorful: vibrant greens, yellows, and blues.

A full moon hangs high in the sky as GRACE, guitar slung over one shoulder, opens the window and climbs halfway out. On the windowsill, she leaves a cup attached to a long line of string. Another cup is in her hand. As she launches into the air, yellow-feathered wings unfold from beneath her sundress.

She is gone in an instant.

The room quickly fades to black and white.

An unspecified amount of time later, LINNY appears and picks up the cup, transfixed. She begins to whisper into it.

LINNY

Where did you go?

(beat)

Grace? Where did you go?

A pause before GRACE's voice trickles down the string.

GRACE

You remember when Mom used to read us *Where the Wild Things Are*?

LINNY

Yes?

GRACE

It's nothing like that.

LINNY

Oh.

GRACE

Hey, cheer up.

LINNY

I can't. It's like you disappear a hundred times a day.

GRACE

What do you mean?

LINNY

Well, I could be brushing my teeth or doing my laundry or painting my toenails, and a memory of you will explode inside my chest.

GRACE

(remorseful)

Sounds painful.

LINNY

It is. Like, remember how you used to empty the kitchen cabinets of pots and pans, forming makeshift drum sets, and I'd draw crowds with chalk on the driveway – a pink-and-green blob for each one of your fans? Or how when I was six and you were eight, you developed the habit of wedging your leotard between your butt cheeks in ballet class? You'd yank the fabric as high as it would go and duck-waddle over to the mirror, urging me to do the same. Well, I'll want to joke about this with you – and that's when the stumbling feeling will hit, over and over again, because you're not stretched out in our backyard hammock, a book like *Into the Wild* balanced on your knees. And you're not in the band room at school, showboating on the piano, a crowd of boys leaning in to catch a whiff of your Granny Smith apple body lotion. And you sure aren't planning epic trips to the middle of the Indian Ocean with me, or knocking on the wall separating our bedrooms, complaining that it's two a.m. and you're too wound up to sleep.

(beat)

Grace?

LINNY drops the cup and sticks her head out the window, her neck craning to the sky.

LINNY (continued)

(angry)

Grace?

The scene is rewound, as if going back in time.