

A Hollowed Heart

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Arthur Radley peered through the dusty window curtains, squinting at the light and watching the young Finches pass by. It was the little one's first year, and he would often hear the girl complaining avidly and dragging her feet. Like all children, they seemed so impressionable and innocent. *Maybe I should reach out to them?* Arthur thought. Their father was one heck of a good man. He hoped they haven't been led to believe the twisted superstitions and distorted backstory that many had given him and made thrive. He had heard passing conversations of people describing him as "six-and-a-half feet tall" and that "a long jagged scar ran across his face" and "what teeth he had were yellow and rotten." What both disgusted, yet amused him most was the rumour that he "dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch." Disheartened, he pondered how he might reach out an offer of friendship to them.

There was no chance he would talk to them in person. He knew he'd freeze and scurry back inside, socially terrified. He could leave a letter addressed to them and drop it in their post box. But no, Arthur got tight chested and violently aquiver with the mere notion of walking out of sight of his sanctuary. What if he never left his property? He knew they passed by every day, so what if he left something where they could see it? He could deliver it in the dead of night, shrouded by the comforting blanket of stark nothingness. He remembered back when he was a boy when he used to drop things off in the hollow in the front yard when playing with his friends, so he could retrieve them later.

That night, as he waited for his brother to fall asleep, Arthur lay in bed and considered what he should place in the hollow. It had to catch their eyes. What did children like these days? His eyes drifted sideways, focusing on a small, mostly-used packet by his bed, an idea flickering inside his head. Quickly, he gathered up the two remaining pieces of gum and grasped them as he tiptoed towards the front door. He listened for the sound of his brother, Nathan, snoring heavily before slipping outside. Arthur froze, feeling frantic, before pausing to remind himself that no one could see him. He groped around in the darkness, and his hands suddenly detected the ruggedness of bark, belonging to the only tree in the yard.

He carefully placed the gum inside the hollow before heading back towards the house, slipping through the door and easing it shut. He cautiously went back to bed, his heart jittery yet hopeful.

The next afternoon, Arthur raced to the window, drawn by the sound of children. He watched the little Finches stop by the hollow shocked, and then debate whether they should take the gum. Arthur looked on, praying they'd accept this anonymous offer. Only when they left, faces lit with curiosity and delight that he let out a relieved breath.

Arthur debated what a worthy second gift might be. It had to make them realise the first gift wasn't a mistake, to draw them in. Arthur took several days before he decided what – a small box of coins, gathering dust and old pitiful memories in his room. It was a fine treasure when he was growing up, but now he was only reminded of a and far-off time that he couldn't go back to. That night he put it in the hollow and raced back quietly, this time with a slight smile hovering on his lips.

The children were surprised the following day. Did they realise who the gifts were from? Arthur was feeling hopeful for the first time in so long. He must make his next gifts better.

Weeks passed, and the hollow kept presenting the Finches with offerings: a ball of twine (to be used in any way their wild imaginations saw fit), two figures carved from soap (a little more laborious from Arthur, who'd spent a week carving them carefully), a full pack of gum (to thank them for

noticing his pitiful efforts the first time), and a spelling medal (an old relic he was actually proud of, and Arthur hoped that it would encourage them to work hard in their schooling). Every day, the young Finches would race down the path, eager to see if anything awaited them.

Arthur began to wake up content in the mornings, the children giving him a purpose. He wanted to make every gift meaningful, but now he didn't have many things left to give. He raked his cupboards for ideas but found nothing.

Arthur strode out of his room, bumping into his brother in the hallway. Nathan sneered at him suspiciously.

"You look right joyful today, Arthur," he spat. "What's there to be happy about, you miserable wretch?" Arthur's heart beat rapidly, suddenly on the verge of crying.

Arthur stuttered, "I just like life today, Nate. Is that so bad?"

"You better not be communicating with those chirren you spy on all the damn time!"

"Never! I's a just hear voices so I see who they belong to, 'is all."

Nathan gave Arthur a final scowl before shoving past him and disappearing into his room.

Arthur let out a sigh, letting his heart slow down and his hands stop trembling. His eyes drifted before focusing on an item on the dusty, rickety table in the hall. A pocket watch, discarded as a background prop of this haunting set. It was their father's, a terrible, spiteful man. It was never sold, but Arthur could never understand why. It was not like Nathan noticed its existence, much like Arthur most of the time.

The following afternoon, the young Finches' excited voices could be heard through the whole house. Arthur prayed that Nathan didn't hear. But no there was no sign of him.

The next day he found out why. Arthur peered through the curtains, perplexed as to what they were seeing. That night, he discovered Nathan had filled the tree hollow with cement. That was why he cast the accusations. Arthur was distraught at the sight of it but knew he'd never be able to confront his brother. Arthur broke down in tears, suddenly disheartened and morose. He silently cursed Nathan for being so controlling and himself for being so weak and submissive. No, he didn't need friends. Why should he bother when every time he reached out, something intervened. Arthur guessed he would live forever alone and there was nothing he could do.