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RED BIRD

WHITNEY RAY

There is someone in the yard, Anne thinks. The cedar branches sway. Birds scatter from the feeders. Cardinals, blue jays, and house sparrows throw shadows through the picture window as they flee. Dark outlines of wings are stamped briefly onto the chenille blanket that covers Anne's feet.

She pushes a button on the side of her hospital bed, and the top half of the contraption rises with a whirring sound until she sits upright. Her son bought her the bed from a medical supply store, set it up in front of the living room window so she can observe her birds at the feeders. The effort of pressing the button makes her fingers throb deep in the bone, despite the pills she takes daily. The medication makes Anne feel groggy and removed from her body, but prevents the pain from becoming excruciating. The pain has evolved, become sharper, as her rheumatoid arthritis has progressed. The ache seems to come from within the marrow now, as if the yellow sponge inside is drying up to dust like an old foam cushion.

Anne watches a young man emerge from the grove of cedars and brambles that borders the house. A camouflage baseball cap, lanky legs in jeans, work boots. A rifle is tucked into the crook of his arm. A string of brambles snares his ankle and he stumbles, hitting his head on one of the hanging feeders. Bird seed falls on his shoulders. He mouths a curse. A boy, really, Anne thinks. Early twenties, she would say. Acne dots his brow. A long strip of hair, a rat tail, grows from the nape of his neck. Rough-looking. He reminds Anne of her son in his wildest years, of the renegade friends he sometimes ran with, feral and aggressive. She eyes the phone on the bedside table, thinks of speaking with the sheriff or calling her son at the bank in Mason. She is ashamed by her fear of a boy she might have offered pie to years ago, but the arthritis has made her weak. Moderately debilitated, her doctor says. Severe debilitation will arrive eventually.

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The boy cannot see her, she reminds herself. The bright spring light turns the windows into mirrors. He is staring at the house, looking toward the front door. Probably trying to decide if the place is lived in. Since Anne's husband died, since the pain wrapped around her and squeezed, the small brick house has fallen into extreme disrepair. The surrounding fifty acres seems to be swallowing the structure back up. The boy moves around the corner, and Anne loses sight of him. She leans over and grasps the cordless phone, sparks of pain traveling up from her wrist.

There is a knock at the front door, a quick, hard rap. She holds her breath and listens. He knocks again, longer and louder this time. Anne grips the bedrails and eases herself up slowly, holding the short rubber antenna of the phone in her teeth. The front door is twenty feet away. She uses her father's old cane to maneuver. The handle feels slick and cool. Her knees scrape and flame like match-heads as she walks. He knocks again when she reaches the door. Anne stands to catch her breath, glances down at her clothing. She wears baggy drawstring pants, purple slipper socks, and a sweatshirt with a coffee stain across the front. Her short bob is desperately in need of trimming. She used to have a slim, athletic figure, was always proud of it. Even when her son was growing up she made sure she put money aside for pretty skirts and blouses. She'd be lovely, well-put together now, at sixty-three, if the arthritis hadn't eaten her away. Her cheeks are hollow, her hips jagged and sunken. She rarely ventures into town anymore, relying on her son to bring prescriptions, TV dinners, and magazines. The gravel road is too jarring, and she is embarrassed for people to see her, shriveled and drugged like this. She hates to show herself to this strange boy. She cracks the door open, standing behind it so he cannot see her clothing or the cane.

"Can I help you?" she asks. The sky is a pure, sharp blue, the scent of blooming Bradford pear trees musky on the wind.

"Need to use your phone."

She smells whiskey on him. When she was young the smell of

alcohol on Nate's breath excited her. After their marriage he became a functioning alcoholic, drank Pig's Eye beer in the barn every evening. She worried about him so much, loved him so hard she sometimes wondered if she absorbed his symptoms. If her own body were ever examined, her liver might be tough and scarred, her esophagus eroded.

"My truck broke down," the boy says.

His front teeth are tinged gray, Anne notices. Shameful for someone that young. She wonders who his mother is, if she lives nearby. She holds the phone out to him through the door. He takes the receiver but doesn't dial.

"Your husband home, lady?"

She is taken aback. He must be a stranger. Nearly everyone around town heard about Nate's death a year ago.

"Yes, he's right inside." But her voice falters. He is staring straight at her. His eyes are pale blue.

"Need to talk to your husband."

"I'll get him." She tries to slam the door shut, but he grabs it, swinging the door out wide until Anne is revealed, hunched over her cane.

"Need to come in for a minute," he says. He slides past her into the living room, cramming the phone, the only phone in the god-damned house, into the back pocket of his jeans. A nutcase, she thinks, drunk, maybe jacked-up on meth. Adrenaline heightens her senses, cuts through the fog of the medication. She walks back to the hospital bed, feeling terrified and helpless. She lowers herself onto the side of the mattress, her hands shaking wildly.

The boy is in the kitchen, wrenching open drawers and cabinets. Through the open doorway that separates the kitchen from the living room, Anne can see the rifle laid out on the kitchen table, barrel glimmering under the fluorescent light. She looks at the large river rock sitting by the fireplace, imagines herself chucking it toward the boy's skull. She remembers an article her son cut from the newspaper a few

months ago about a woman, living in the mountains of New Mexico, who was eaten by a bear that broke into her cabin. Her son pointed out the dangers of living alone and Anne laughed. *Honey, there haven't been bears here in two hundred years.* But a bear would rummage like this boy is doing, paw through things searching for bacon, before tearing a woman to pieces.

"What've you been hunting this morning?" Anne calls to the boy. She is a professional small-talker, her skills honed at high school football games. Talk seems her only defense now.

"Turkeys," the boy says.

Spring turkey season. Since the weather warmed, flocks of turkeys have come to nibble fallen sun-flower seeds beneath her feeders. Anne wakes early to watch them, just as dawn is breaking. Their bodies are round and thick, somewhat clumsy, so different from the agile cardinals and juncos that dance around the feeders. She thinks of Nate, hunting every autumn with their son. Nate was always grinning when they returned, his face flushed from the cold, carrying a bouquet of ducks by the feet.

The boy has discovered Nate's tequila bottle in the cabinet over the stove. He takes a deep swig, slams the bottle on the table next to his rifle. He looks something like Nate when he was young. Wiry muscles, surly attitude.

"What's your name?" Anne asks him.

"Tanner. What's yours, lady?" He's mocking her, she thinks, but at least he's speaking. She would be far more afraid if he were silent.

She tells him her name. Tanner doesn't answer when she asks him where his family lives.

"Your man's dead, huh?" Tanner says. Anne's face feels cold. Perhaps he noticed the absence of muddy boots by the door, the gray dust on the *Farming Today* magazines.

The boy strides into the living room. His eyes pass over a series of framed photographs on the wall, aerial pictures of Nate's farm and the house taken by a crop duster in the seventies. The house is a small red

rectangle, the fields minuscule squares. Nate loved the pictures, but they make Anne feel lonely, insignificant. Tanner looks at her bedside stand, littered with wadded up tissues, magazines, and pill bottles.

“The house is a mess,” she tells him. “That shag carpet drives me crazy now.” She knows she is babbling. Tanner begins to pick the pill bottles off the table, shaking them to see how many tablets are inside. Anne thinks of maracas.

“What do these do for you?” he asks.

“For pain, inflammation. Won’t do a thing unless you’ve got arthritis.”

“You’re one a them D.A.R.E. to keep kids off drugs moms, right?” He laughs at her, crams his hands full of pill bottles and throws them onto the kitchen table with the rest of his stash.

Alcohol, drugs, money, she thinks frantically. He’ll want money next.

“I don’t have any cash here,” she tells him when he re-enters the living room. Nate used to watch the news every evening, and Anne hated hearing about the shootings and robberies. Incidents of violent crime seemed distant and made up to her, like urban legends.

The boy doesn’t respond, only stands near her, surveying the room. Anne looks out the picture window. The birds have returned to their feeders. There are three cardinals, two brilliantly red males, a gray female with an orange beak. The boy seems uncertain, she thinks. He seems to have lost his pillaging momentum.

Anne points to the cardinals, tells Tanner that they are her favorite birds. “My husband called them red-birds, not cardinals. He said that all the red-birds fly back to Georgia at sunset, to make red streaks in the sky.” She’s tossing scraps of her life out to him. She wants him to know her. It must be more difficult to rob or shoot someone you know.

Tanner actually appears to be watching the cardinals. The two territorial males are sparring, chirping, and swooping at one another. How silly, Anne thinks. At this angle she is not afraid of the boy. He is like Nate was, pitiful after a run of liquor and bravado. Like her son at

fifteen, sulking. Tanner removes a dented flask from the pocket of his jeans, takes a swig as he watches the cardinals argue.

“My husband used to drink,” she tells him. “I wish I could tell you that you’ll die of that stuff, but he had a heart attack instead.”

Tanner holds the flask out to Anne and she takes it. The sharp metal mouth of the flask against her lips and the burn of cheap whiskey are acutely pleasurable. She’s shocked that she is drinking with the robber. She’s felt contained for so long, braced against Nate’s death, against the onslaught of pain in her joints. What a struggle it’s been to behave properly, to act resigned and peaceful.

She was a firecracker in high school. That’s what her father called her, a little firecracker, and he swore she’d come home pregnant one day and they’d have to ship her off. She rode around with boys who drove too fast, chain smoked. Anne always thought she felt things more strongly than other girls, that her senses were cranked way up like the color adjustment knobs on the old TVs. When she met Nate, she was glad to marry him early on, not so she could have a house and title, but because she needed to make love to him in a real bed, not the cramped back of a Chevy. Illness has blurred and numbed her senses. Yet she feels present and whole right now, she thinks. Fully aware for the first time in months.

“You got a girlfriend?” she asks Tanner. She takes a final drink from the flask and hands it back to him.

“She took off.” He walks over to Nate’s recliner and thumps down like his body is heavy.

Anne tells him she’s sorry, that he’ll find somebody soon. He’s young.

She remembers her first boyfriend before Nate, the one who abandoned her for the leader of the pep squad. She felt like she couldn’t catch her breath properly for weeks afterward, as though her stomach was tender and bruised. She felt the same way when Nate started drinking in earnest and again after he died. Like she’d been kneed in the abdomen.

“I know what that’s like, honey. Love can make you feel the best you’ve ever felt or the worst.”

Like good sex or seeing your husband pass out and piss himself in the front yard. All felt intensely, the color and sound turned way up.

She tells Tanner that watching the birds helped her feel better after she became sick, after her husband died. That when she watches birds long enough she forgets her own body and feels almost a part of them. Diving and feeding, warm air sliding through feathers.

“Lord, that sounds silly,” she says. “I sound like one of those crazy new age books.”

Tanner grunts, makes some sound of acknowledgement. He seems lulled by her voice, almost sleepy. Then he jerks up, jumps out of the recliner.

“You got a purse in here? You got a box of jewelry?” He’s nearly yelling now. Adrenaline numbs Anne’s throat, her hands. He is dangerous, unhinged. She was fooling herself into empathy for him. She can’t remember where her purse is, on the bedroom dresser maybe? Her wedding band is in the jewelry box. Her hands are too swollen for rings.

Tanner stomps into the kitchen, places his hand on the butt of the rifle.

“Don’t fuck around with me anymore, lady!”

Anne tells him that she has trouble thinking straight sometimes, but the purse, the jewelry should be in the bedroom down the hall. The jewelry box is oak. Her son made it for her when he was in ninth grade wood shop.

She can hear Tanner in her bedroom, throwing things, ripping out the dresser drawers. Something crashes to the floor. Probably the gold-framed picture of Anne and Nate on their wedding day. Damn it to hell, she thinks, Nate never had to protect her from anything. There was never an intruder, a robbery, in forty-two years of marriage. The only thing he ever did was shoot at raccoons in the trash barrels. She implores Nate for some supernatural help, tells him that the boy is

going to take her wedding band. A knot of rage swells in her throat. She hears herself say “please” out loud. Anne’s vision darkens and she knows that she will pass out as she has done a handful of times throughout the last year. She spins, sees a duck, shot in the air, spiraling down from flight.

He is lifting her. Anne feels his muscled arm against the back of her knees, his palm cupping her head. He must be placing her on the hospital bed. She feels him tuck a blanket around her legs. Nate, she thinks. She remembers how concerned he was when she became ill. He brewed gallons of hot, sweet tea for her, tried, clumsily, to prepare meals. She opens her eyes to the scraggly boy, bending over her, looking pale and concerned. The boy smells of sweat. She misses the scent of a man’s sweat. Her son smells like paper and evergreen air freshener from the bank.

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“I didn’t hurt you!” Tanner says. “You know that right? I just walked in ...”

No, Anne thinks, you didn’t hurt me. Nate’s gone. My body is attacking itself. Honey, you’re the least of what hurts me.

She scans the living room, notices her faux leather purse and jewelry box thrown onto the floor. Her string of yellowing pearls is curled against the brown carpet. Tanner walks away from her, crouches down and begins to pick up pieces of jewelry. She sees the pale gold band in his fingers.

“Please don’t take that.”

“Lady, I’m sorry, real sorry, but you don’t know what problems I’ve got.”

Anne remembers lecturing her son when he was a teenager, informing him that the world didn’t revolve around him. She always wanted to tell Nate that too. She never understood his bitterness. Bitter about what, that he never did more with his life than grow wheat and raise a healthy family? She wonders if the boy’s anger comes from poverty, bad parents, the girl who left. She feels her rage loosen

around her neck and shoulders, as if someone is unzipping a constricting dress. Everything is unraveling. Both her house and body are decaying and Nate is gone. Hell, how much could it hurt her to lose that ring? She can't even wear it anymore.

"There are Wal-Mart sacks under the kitchen sink if you need one for your loot," she tells him. She feels exhausted. She watches Tanner place the pills, bottle, purse, and jewelry into a sack like a kid packing his lunch. He returns to the living room weighed down with two bags and his rifle. A grotesque trick-or-treater. Silly. She recalls Nate days before he died, slumped in his recliner, his round pot belly, the jowls on his face. How angry he looked, when he was drunk, like he'd been cheated every day of his life.

"You won't tell anybody, will you, if I give you back the phone?" Tanner asks.

"I won't."

"No," he says. "Lady, I'm sorry, so sorry." He jogs toward the door, the outline of the phone bulging through his back pocket.

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She stares out the picture window and watches him struggle through the brush again, a line of startled birds rushing up from the feeders. Gone, as if he'd never been at all. Part of her wishes he were still here. She might have been able to talk to him if she'd tried harder. By the time she attempted to get Nate to talk to her he was too old, too stubborn. She wonders how long it will be before her son arrives to check on her.

She wants to be outside. The house is musty and warm. The pain rolls through her when she lifts herself out of bed. She hobbles through the living room without the cane, dragging her feet like a lame horse, nearly tripping on the wooden jewelry box.

A gust of wind catches the door when she opens it. She stands on the porch steps, one hand on the corner of the house for support, and watches slate gray clouds drift over the sun. The lilac bush is heavy with blooms. The blue paint on Nate's old tractor is peeling. The colors are brilliant. Lord, she thinks, it's been so long since she's been

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outside. She runs her tongue over her gums and tastes Tanner's bad whiskey. She thinks of the boy's arm under her knees, the yeasty smell of his sweat. She remembers pressing her face into Nate's neck when he came in from the field, tasting his salt. The cool wind whips through her hair and a cardinal trills, "prettyprettypretty." Anne looks up and sees a crimson male watching her from a cedar, his wings flaming against the dark green branches.