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Birdie

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BIRDIE

Although she turned the pages, she was not reading them. The book was a prop: she wanted to make it clear that she was not lonely. Without her book, she found it hard to maintain the correct, businesslike yet whimsical expression suitable for a woman sitting alone on a park bench eating a sandwich.

As she chewed, out of the corner of her eye she kept seeing a little gray bird wandering about on the ground. The bird walked in slow spirals, with a kind of performative nonchalance that was hard to ignore.

“Hello,” the woman said, at last. She could no longer stand the tension being brought to bear on her sense of propriety.

The bird made a slight shake of the head, as if startled, and replied, “Oh! Hello.”

The bird and the woman looked at each other, their pleasant expressions stiffening in the awkward, lengthening silence.

The woman suddenly noticed something peculiar and pathetic about the bird.

“It must be very difficult being a bird without wings,” she said.

“What are you talking about? I have wings. See?” The bird flexed what were either severely stunted wing-buds or the remains of what had once been bigger wings but were now shorn to stubs. The gesture lasted less than a few seconds, after which the woman wasn’t sure that she’d seen any wings at all.

“Ah, yes. Do you live around here?” the woman asked the bird.

“Right now, I don’t live anywhere.” The bird looked like she was trying not to cry. The little creature stared at the ground, and wind ruffled the soft feathers on her head. “I have good money. It’s just that no one will—” her voice faltered.

“Why don’t you come live with me?” offered the woman. “You can live in my belly.”

“Really? That’s *ever* so kind of you,” the bird said.

The truth was, the woman was eager to have another lodger. Years ago, she’d evicted a tenant whose presence seemed, at the time, inconvenient. The decision proved rash. It took her years to find a replacement. This subsequent tenant left hastily, in the night, after barely three months. The woman thought things had been uncharacteristically silent in the rental unit, and

when she investigated, her suspicions were confirmed. The girl hadn't even settled in. Except for a ring around the bathtub and a bunch of blackened carrots in the vegetable crisper, you'd never have known she'd been there.

"Ever so kind," the bird repeated, the words coming out like song.

That must be a great advantage but also a great drawback to being a bird, the woman thought: you'd expect your life to be like a musical.

The bird was, at first, an ideal tenant. She was quiet and undemanding. She used almost no hot water or electricity. Prior to the bird's arrival, the woman had typed out a list of rules and taped them to the refrigerator ("No smoking on or within twenty feet of the premises. No modifications to the suite without written consent. No loud parties. Tenant must purchase and install drawer liners..."), but this sort of precaution seemed to have been unnecessary. The bird no more made her presence felt than a dust mote, a poppy seed, a bit of dandelion fluff.

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Gradually, however, the woman began to notice small puckers in the placid fabric of their mutual space. She would hear faint noises; she would catch a whiff of an unfamiliar aroma, which would disappear upon her sniffing. These disturbances, she told herself, were to be expected. The impressions left upon her senses were so minor, she even convinced herself that she imagined them.

But she did *not* imagine them. The woman began to detect the shape and rhythm of the bird's day, based on things she increasingly could not help but observe, secondhand. Both the bird and she were homebodies, so the woman had ample opportunity to familiarize herself with the bird's habits, and much to familiarize herself with. The woman began to take notes. Years ago, she'd bought herself a satin-covered journal but had never gotten around to writing in it; she thought she may as well get some use out of it now. Under the heading "Bird," she composed a list:

Bird uses rosewater atomizer, occasionally gardenia.

Bird cannot cook hamburger without setting off fire alarm.

Bird likes Bach, particularly cello suites.

In afternoon, bird watches soap opera in Spanish but talks back to TV in English.

Bird not satisfied with placement of bedroom furniture, has rearranged twice.

Bird has slight dust allergy.

Every Friday, bird bakes sourdough bread.

Bird dabbles in oils, poss. also watercolors.

Morning shower takes no more than twenty minutes, never less than ten.

Sometimes bird cries herself to sleep.

Bird is building something (bookshelves?).

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And of course, the bird often sang. The bird did not have a particularly beautiful voice, but she was conscientious in the way she carried a tune, which almost amounted to the same thing. She must be compensating, the woman thought, for those funny little wings—or whatever they were. Poor creature.

The woman added fewer and fewer notations to the list as the months passed, until at last she stopped writing in the journal altogether. The novelty of the bird's presence had worn flat, like the plush on a velveteen seat cover. What had once been sounds became noises; scents became smells. A clatter of pans arising from the bird's kitchen would cause the woman to wince and then rub her arms to smooth down the goose bumps. The woman considered giving the bird a talking-to, but her complaints, as she rehearsed them in her head, sounded unjustified. Wasn't the bird just going about her business? Would it not have been the same with the other tenants, had they stayed long enough?

An invitation arrived in the mail. It was from the bird.



Please join me
7 p.m.
tonight
I have something to show you!

Out of habit, the woman flexed the card between her fingers: good paper stock. She was charmed by the bird's gesture, although she had mixed feelings about being invited in such a formal fashion to a place where she, by way of ownership, was technically the hostess.

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When the woman arrived at 7:15 p.m. (so as not to be gauche), she was surprised to see how the bird had claimed the space. She'd hung pictures on the walls and she'd repainted. She'd laid down rugs and she'd changed the ceiling fixtures. She'd made herself right at home. It was as if the bird had always lived there. Was it a trick of the light, the woman wondered, or was the suite bigger than she remembered it? It felt like a different place entirely. The décor's drastic alteration represented a violation of the lease, but the woman said nothing: it now seemed more the bird's space than hers.

The bird had set out bowls of various snacks, including pretzels, popcorn, chips, pistachio nuts, candy corn, and dried apricots, which crowded the coffee table in front of the television. The woman was the only guest.

"I have a project that I've been working on, but I have no one to share it with," the bird said. She pressed the remote control, and black-and-white images began to flicker on the TV screen. Great, thought the woman. An *art film*.

It was a dance. Onscreen, the bird spun and whirled through a blizzard—torn newsprint, milkweed, and tufts of cotton snow fell in a slow cascade. At first, the bird's movements were obscure, but the more the woman watched, the clearer the little creature became. The bird twirled alongside spreading puddles of black liquid, and her image danced with her, joined at her light-stepping feet, a ghost reappearing in a series of dark mirrors. The accompaniment was very like the sound of waves, sped up, and layered onto itself. The woman could almost feel her heart hitting the wet shore, again and again.

“That was beautiful,” she said when it was over.
“I’m so pleased,” the bird said.

From that day on, the woman truly *felt* the presence of the bird. She felt her birdy feet tramping up and down the floorboards. Whatever songs the bird sang, the woman felt their notes filling her ears like water. If the woman was very quiet, she could feel when the bird was standing directly below her—which was often. At night, she could feel the bird breathing and would try to match her own inhalations to the bird’s small sips of air. The woman no longer imagined the bird performing and improvising on her daily routines; she felt that she lived with her, and that her mental motion pictures were more akin to footage. Hoping to influence the bird’s choice of tunes, the woman found herself playing certain records on her old garage-sale stereo: she was thrilled later to hear the bird singing harmony, superimposing little riffs over the memory of the songs. The woman cooked foods that she thought the bird might find appealing, and would wait for a replication of her own kitchen odors wafting up from below. It was exhausting, the woman felt, living this vicarious life. It was almost too much. At the same time, the woman was fearful that the bird would move out, like the others. She remembered, with tenderness, the bird’s blizzard-dance.

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The woman began to notice things going missing from her apartment. She thought she may have misplaced the odd household item (her pink comb, the booklet of stamps she’d just bought), but she couldn’t explain the depletion of her pantry. Cans, jars, and boxes had been rearranged on the shelves, leaving untidy, telltale gaps. One afternoon, she came across a crumpled note that had fallen to the floor: “Making chilly (sp?) Needed garbanso beans. Thx!! Birdie.” Other, similar notes had somehow found their way under the stove. They’d been written on the backs of fortune-cookie promises.

The woman did not remember ever having given the bird a back-door key.

The noise level, which had risen sharply over the last two months, finally pushed the woman to pay Birdie a visit. The bird had obviously been undertaking some project, one that involved hammering and sawing, cracking and scraping, late into the night. The woman hadn’t wanted to interfere with the bird’s creative efforts, but enough, as they say, was enough.

Once the woman was standing on the bird’s premises, she felt deeply confused. Such transformations the bird had brought about—it did not seem physically possible! The place was aglow with red, pink, and orange textured

wall hangings, whose hues were reflected in a cylindrical crystal chandelier. The formerly poky series of rooms had been replaced with a sweeping, open area, featuring a sunken living room with a wood-burning stove. Long curtains of crimson silk hung on the far wall, through which the woman even thought she glimpsed ivy-strewn trellises lining a small patio.

“Who said you could build an extension on the unit? Who said you could raid my larder? Who said you could take such *OUTRAGEOUS LIBERTIES?*” The woman held up her hands and spun around, gesturing at all she saw. She’d intended admonishment, but instead her words came out as congratulatory.

“I’m leaving,” the bird said calmly. Sunlight, beaming through a newly installed plate-glass window, made her gray feathers golden. She looked lovely—stunted, strange little thing though she was.

“But—where will you go?” *Don’t go, don’t go, don’t go.*

“Oh, I don’t know. I thought I’d fly south.”

“You? Fly? And how will you do that?” The woman made an ugly motion: she held her fists at her shoulders and levered her elbows up and down.

“I told you. I have wings.”

34 “Let me guess. Are they wings that you’ve sewn, oh-so-cleverly? Are they made of decorated cardboard? Are they made of wax? Did you order them off eBay? Or maybe they’re invisible?”

The bird closed her eyes. “Don’t cry,” she said. And then: “The wings aren’t invisible. Let me show you.”

They lifted off the ground. Out of the blurriness that first surrounded her, the woman began to recognize the mounded landscape of clouds rolling beneath her as she soared, dissolving at the edges. And through the mists, so oddly still, like wafting smoke suspended in time, she saw tiny houses, streets, meadows, forests—a flash of a lake—and more forests with their masses of soft, green curves. In an instant, the woman felt herself falling, the cold wind having released its embrace. She screamed as she tumbled through the sky, flailing her limbs as if she could somehow gain purchase against the air, the details of the land beneath her rushing into focus. Such terror. Soon she would hit the ground; she forced herself to open her eyes. She saw birds in a tree, like so many notes of music, like a profusion of dark buds ready to blossom, and she knew she was one of them. She stretched out her great, shining wings. And flew away.