

Bird Lady

The bench was empty when she arrived, save for a piece of paper. The cityscape around the modest clearing of the park hid the horizon from view, but it was clear that sunrise hadn't started.

She sat down beside the note, feeling the cold of the bench beneath her. Chilly air filled her lungs through her nose, and she held it there for a moment. As she exhaled through pursed lips, a gentle whistle filled the park. It seemed to be just as loud everywhere at once. She dipped her hand into the bag, enjoying the softness of its material on her wrinkled skin for a moment. She pulled it back out again along with a handful of birdseed. Her fingers were gentle around it, as if it were something that would crumble into dust if she squeezed too hard. With a casual flick of her hand, she spread it by her feet.

A goldfinch landed first, gently slowing to the point that it reached a natural halt as it hit the floor. Next a wagtail, descending in a series of short swoops. A pigeon followed, lacking the grace of the rest of the flock. Robins, jackdaws, thrushes landed, growing from a small flock to a full-blown legion. It wasn't long until every bird in the city was there, awaiting orders. She fished into the bag again, and in a single handful, threw enough seed to feed them all. They moved like clockwork children's toys.

She reached down and found the piece of paper.

This was a routine that began long ago. Before the buildings had replaced a dense forest of oaks and evergreens. Before the flowers had been confined to their beds, or the grass had been mown. A boulder as a flat-topped centrepiece. On the very first day, a young woman called the birds and told them what to sing.

The sun rose as they moved to her direction.

There were more birds back then – far too many for her to know by name, despite her efforts. There were many mornings, followed by many days, but only so many hours. The mornings themselves were the real spectacle. An incredible feat of orchestral prowess complemented with aerial choreography. As the day went on, the performance grew subtler. The choir singing from the trees in smaller numbers, but beautiful, nonetheless. They'd taper off as the sun moved west, and by the time it disappeared behind the treeline, the birds would stop singing and her duty would be done. Owls would take over, sporting sharp plumage, hooting to their own rhythms.

She got there at the same time every morning, left at the same time each night. As far as she knew, she was the only one in those woods, save for the birds. But then one morning, she arrived early.

He was perched on top of the boulder with an owl stood on a stool beside him. Its wing was outstretched, with him holding a tape measure along the span of its opera cloak wing. A tense lump knotted in her chest, but as she got closer, seeing how scruffy he looked beside the owl in all of its speckled finery, the lump was undone.

"I was wondering if we'd ever meet officially," he said as he lowered the tape measure. "I've enjoyed your work as I've walked home."

His words were confident, but his stiff language was the opposite. It was charming in a way that she didn't understand.

It started as an exchange of pleasantries before slowly growing into a fully-fledged conversation. She asked him about himself, and he explained that he was a tailor.

"You wouldn't tell that by your outfit," she giggled.

"I mostly work with owls."

They kept talking as he cut patterns and sewed them together. His speech was occasionally disrupted as he held pins in his mouth on their journey from fabric to the

cushion he wore on his belt. She complemented his work. He tried to mimic tunes that he remembered from the morning birds.

“It’s the one that goes like this:” he said, before whistling a light, cascading melody. “That’s my favourite. I whistle it to myself when I work sometimes.”

Her cheeks warmed with a rush of blood. “I’ll have them sing it more often.”

Even after the owl, fully dressed, flew away and the morning birds arrived, their conversation didn’t cease. She was sat across from him on top of the boulder, feeling the bumps and pocks of the chilly stone with her palms.

“How long have you been a tailor?”

“About as long as the birds have been singing, I think.”

The birds grew impatient, frustrated at the delay to their performance.

Eventually, a blue tit hopped between them and tweeted restlessly. The two of them lingered for a moment longer, causing the little bird to hop up and down on her hand. It was barely heavy enough to register, but the message was clear.

He walked back through the woods, enjoying the melody of his favourite tune.

That day, the sun rose later than scheduled. It moved across the sky a little quicker, almost as if to make up the time, and the day was shorter. The next morning, their conversation lasted slightly longer and the day, once again, was shorter still.

They hardly noticed as the sunrise was held up in increments, but they couldn’t deny the changes that they’d noticed. Save for the evergreens, the leaves on the trees yellowed, and then browned. Rain came more often, bringing up mud in the clearing when it was previously lush with grass. Frost spread across the flat of the boulder each morning, making the moss frozen and slippery.

She first noticed it when it affected the birds. Little by little, their numbers became fewer. The swallows were the first to stop showing, followed by the martins. For a short while, she told herself that she didn't understand what was going on. They feigned ignorance, spreading a blanket each morning to combat the cold.

And then the snow came.

It fell at night and piled up high. The mud froze beneath it. Skeleton branches stretched from the trunks of the trees to the starless sky. Many of the trees gave into the winter.

"I've never seen anything like this before." The steam of her breath was almost invisible against the blank canvas that the clearing had become. "I think we did this."

His shoulders dropped. It was something that they'd both been thinking for a while, but the words made it real.

He asked her if the birds were still coming each morning, and she told him that it was only the robins. He shivered, partly from the cold, partly because most of the owls had stopped coming too.

Her throat constricted around her words as she tried to talk. She coughed.

"I know what you're trying to say," he offered, smiling weakly. "It's for the best."

She watched him walk away, and when morning came, she watched the snow fill in the footprints that he left. By midday there was no sign that he'd ever been there at all. The clearing was empty of any living being but herself. There was no grief. Just the sense that something tremendously important was missing, like a map without the continents.

The robins arrived, eventually, but they were few and far between. She made them sing his favourite melody, but the notes didn't fit together as nicely as they did when he whistled them on the night they met. It sounded half-hearted, and she wasn't sure if it was on

their part or hers. She wondered if he could still hear them when there were only so many red-breasted birds.

Tears fell slowly. Warm streaks from her eyes to her chin that the winter breeze sapped the warmth of. Her arms wavered from deep sobs that came out in stressed notes of birdsong.

Mornings came and went, as did the days and the afternoons. Before she knew it, everything had returned to the way it was before she even knew he existed. Leaves had returned to the branches of most of the trees, and the trees that had fallen were quickly replaced by saplings. Knee-high grass reclaimed the land that it had lost to the snow. Birds that had fled the cold were back where they belonged.

The birdsong was the only thing that hadn't returned to normal. It was sub-par on anyone's account – especially that of the frustrated looking singers. They watched her desperately, pleading for better direction.

Wind brushed through her fingers as she commanded rises and falls, flourishes and breaks. She barely registered it anymore. Songs repeated themselves, and their quality dithered away in doing so. Misplaced beats became mainstays in every subsequent performance until the original melodies were long lost.

In the haze of it all, she'd lose track of time. Sometimes she didn't register that her duty had finished until the owls arrived in their threadbare costumes. They would land on the surrounding branches and watch her, hootlessly.

The owls were hardly as commanding with their speckles in disarray across feathers that sat too loose on their proud frames. They compensated for this with narrowed eyes, tilted heads, and straighter postures, which she didn't realise was possible. Bowing apologetically, she waved the songbirds away and let the owls' nightly opera take the stage.

Walking away on those nights was harder than she felt it should have been. It was as if she was resisting a magnet that was trying its hardest to pull her back. A magnet that grew in strength as she heard the snipping of scissors and the sewing machine whir.

Until one night, it became too hard for her to walk away. Hidden by the slowly growing pines, she stood, back to the clearing, listening to the percussion of his work.

Before she knew what she was doing, she was walking back to the clearing's edge. She lay down in a bush, trying not to rustle the leaves too much as she navigated the poking branches that pulled on her clothes. The owls pivoted and watched, eyes wide and curious. Laying as still as she could, trying to quieten her thumping heart, she prayed that they would lose interest and go about their business.

She steadied after a while. The ground felt wet from the dewy cold, but she didn't mind. As she closed her eyes, she listened to the gentle vocals of the owls, and his tuneless whistling.

The gentle pecking of a blue tit woke her. She opened her eyes, watching a blurry mass sharpen into a flock of birds. The owls had left the clearing, as had he.

On top of the boulder was a small silk bag. Delicate, gold coloured thread lined the material neatly, with a cord no thicker than her lip holding the top closed. It was full of birdseed, which poured like sand when she lifted the impossibly soft material, revealing a note underneath.

The paper was lumpy from pulp that hadn't fully blended through. Spidery ink traversed the contours of it, reading,

FOR THE MUSICIANS. MAYBE THIS WILL HELP
CHEER THEM UP.

-YOU KNOW WHO.

Smiling for the first time in longer than she'd have liked to admit, she held the bag to her chest like a child with a teddy bear.

Patience, the birds stood in their positions. They watched her bury her hand in the bag, only to bring it back out again in a loose fist. In a single throw, she spread enough birdseed for them all.

Feathers flurried across the ground, making unclear where one bird ended and the next started. In no time at all, every grain had been located and consumed, and they stood like dutiful soldiers.

And with that, the day began. Thousands of individual melodies fit perfectly together like lovers' hands. She threw her body with her arms, wildly. From a distance, she looked closer to an interpretive dancer than a conductor.

Sunset lasted for far longer than it ever had before. The birds, at her command, played songs and danced in the orange light. Murmurations moved above in psychedelic clouds.

It wasn't until some of the birds began to leave on their own accord that she realised how long they had been there. This was punctuated further by the arrival of three owls, all looking worse for wear by tattered feathers that wouldn't sit in place, no matter how often they were fussed over.

One of them, a bark-patterned gentleman, landed delicately on her shoulder. It had tufts of feathers on either side of his head that gave it a constant surprised expression, only

exacerbated by the matted tufts on either brow. She stared into the amber globes of its eyes as it tilted its head to an impossible degree. It hooted under its breath.

Darkness had enveloped the forest by the time she breached the treeline. The opera was well underway. The silence between the surreal calls and responses was made louder by the absence of sewing machines or scissors. Reaching down for the bag, she discovered its absence.

Stumbling over fallen branches and hurdling rocky outcrops, she ran back towards the clearing. The darkness made the forest hazy. Her heartbeat thumped in her ears and throat, almost drowning out the owls.

Eventually, she reached the clearing, and saw him. The shape of a man in the moon's spotlight, with an unopened trunk beside him and a piece of fabric draped over his hands like a shawl. A parliament of owls awaited their fittings.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said, stepping into the moonlight, "I seem to have forgotten something."

She couldn't exactly tell through the darkness, but she could've sworn he was smiling.

The days grew longer after that, but never felt as such. They spent more time together each day as the very first summer began.

Seasons shifted as the forest shrank, making way for hamlets, which were replaced by towns, and eventually, cities, leaving the clearing as a patch of green in a sprawling concrete jungle. She'd meet him when she could, and they commented on how the flowers had been put in neatly organised beds, grass had been mown, and a bench had been built where a boulder had been oh, so long ago. From its stone was carved the sculpture of a man

whose name would likely be forgotten in not much time at all. She would find notes from him, almost every day. Often, they would read the same.

PLAY THAT ONE THAT I LIKE.

SEE YOU TONIGHT.

-YOU KNOW WHO.

Still smiling at the note, she'd take the birdseed in a hand that had been aged by centuries of performances. In one throw, she spread enough seed for each bird, and began the day anew.