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Little Yellow Bird

EXCEPT FOR THE DOG BARKING next door and the buzzing of spring flies chasing each other through the tattered strips of window screen, the house was quiet. From the front door, he stepped immediately into the living room—a space hosting a TV, a brown chair, and a red couch. The house smelled of sour milk and feces, and something else not discernible. He called first for Mrs. Thibodeau, then for Shelley. He dropped his cap onto the couch. His hair was wet and he could feel the sweat on his face. It was hot for June.

Mrs. Thibodeau appeared first—coming out of the kitchen. She was a huge woman who left slivers of light on either side as she passed through the small doorways.

“You’re home then,” she said. Dark stains appeared on her brown housedress beneath her breasts and arms. “I’ll get my bag and be on my way. It’s hot as the very blazes out there. Very strange for June.” She turned slowly and shuffled back into the kitchen. He didn’t answer her. She didn’t expect answers. “Your supper’s in the oven. I didn’t want to have to turn on that oven in this heat, but there was nothin’ to do about it.” Her eyes narrowed. “I see you didn’t get them groceries I asked for.” She shook her head, noting his failure.

“Shelley’s outside playin.’ If she’s up to the pond, them flies will eat her alive.” She briefly inclined her head toward the narrow passageway that led from the living room to the two small bedrooms. “She hasn’t eaten at all today. Just layin’ on her bed, staring.”

He nodded, acknowledging Mrs. Thibodeau’s comments without actually looking at her. He wiped a hand across his forehead to stop the salty sweat from rolling into his eyes. He watched Mrs. Thibodeau’s bulk trudge toward her rusted Malibu. The car sagged as Mrs. Thibodeau opened the door and hauled herself in behind the wheel. If he could afford proper help, he wouldn’t have the woman in his house, but the government was

paying for Mrs. Thibodeau. Extramural care they called her. He called her something altogether different.

He stood looking out the living room window, watching until the dust from her car had disappeared and only the flies remained, banging desperately into the window glass. He sank for a moment onto the red couch. He looked at the TV remote still caught in the valley between two couch cushions. He had abandoned it there last night. He watched the flies buzz and thud against the window. He heard the dog barking again next door. He could have sat for one minute, one hour, or one day.

In time, he pushed himself up off the couch and headed toward the kitchen. His nose curled involuntarily at the smells of Mrs. Thibodeau's cooking. He looked in the oven and saw something that might have been pork chops. He closed the oven door and turned off the oven, even though more than an hour remained on the timer. He ran cold water into the single stainless sink and splashed it over his face with his hands. He grabbed a dishtowel to dry his face and grimaced at the dirt that was crusted on it.

He headed down the hall toward the bedrooms. He tapped hesitantly on the first door. He got no answer. He expected none. He pushed the door open gently. The usual smell accosted him, but in the afternoon heat, it threatened to overwhelm him. He looked toward the figure lying inert on the bed. He swallowed the bile that rose in his own throat before he spoke.

"How're ya doin', Alice?" Alice's eyelids fluttered. Even her eyelids were thin. Now her grey eyes stared at him, vacant, lost. Her lips, once so different, cracked and bled as she tried to smile.

"Hi John." Her voice wasn't bright, but was trying to be. "I can't stand that woman." She snarled, almost sounding like the Alice of old. Her eyes seemed to spark.

"I know."

"She said I crapped the bed. I never did."

"Course you never. Don't mind about it." The wretched brown stains that had seeped from the colostomy bag told him they were both lying.

"You want something to eat?"

"No thanks."

"Right then. You just want to sleep?"

"I guess." Her eyes were cloudy again. "When's Mama comin' home?" she asked.

He ignored her question. He always ignored the questions for which there were no answers. "Go to sleep, Alice."

He backed out of the room, closing the door behind him. Shutting off that room, that smell, those eyes. He leaned his back against the hallway

wall. If he lifted his arm he could touch the wall on the other side of the hallway. He didn't even have to fully extend his arm. He and Alice had laughed about their tiny mini-home when they'd first moved in. At least it wasn't one of those homes in a park full of them. No, they'd had bigger plans than that. They had bought some land. Not great land, but it was theirs. In time they'd hoped to build a real house on the land. But that was before Alice got sick.

Back in the kitchen he took a beer out of the refrigerator. He carried the beer and Mrs. Thibodeau's pork chops out the back door off the kitchen. He dumped the pork chops into the silver garbage can that stood to the side of the door, leaning against the house. He sat carefully in the single chair he had outside, mindful of the missing lengths of weave on the seat. He stuck his legs out in front of him as far as they'd stretch. He pulled his package of cigarettes out of the front pocket of his t-shirt and lit one. For a moment he felt like he could take some deep breaths. He might even close his eyes.

"Papa! Stop him! Catch him!" Shelley's voice reached through his reverie as clear as hammers on metal pipes. She was running toward him from the back of their wooded property, chasing their cat. Her legs looked out of control and her little arms pumped up and down in wild patterns. He smiled despite the heat.

"What's the emergency, Shell Bell?" he called.

She could barely form words, breathless from her run.

"Mac's got it in his mouth, Pop! Stop him! A little baby."

The cat, running just ahead of Shelley, was carrying a small splash of yellow in his mouth. He put his beer down hard on the ground beside his chair. Some of the liquid splashed up through the neck. He stood. He knew better than to chase the cat. He waited. Mac ran with his prize toward their back door. He leaned over and pinned Mac to the ground—a firm hand on the back of Mac's neck. Mac growled.

"Drop it, Mac!" He demanded and squeezed Mac's scruff like an angry mother cat. Mac's jaw slackened and the yellow bird dropped onto the brown dirt.

Shelley ran to the spot. "Papa, is he alright? Did you save him? I was playing by the pond and I saw Mac jump on something, and then the other birds were all crying. Pop, is he OK?" Her words spilled over each other running together.

He looked down at the pathetic victim lying on the brown earth. Its little chest was pulsing faster than the beats could be counted. Its eyes were spots of black oil. They were fixed and watching. The bird tried to right itself, but couldn't.

He poked the toe of his boot toward the bird. "Not much left of this guy, Shell," he said.

"Oh, you did save him, Papa! He's still alive!" She scooped the trembling yellow body into her hands. He thought Shelley held it as gently as Alice had held Shelley when she was just born in the hospital. "Can we keep him, Pop? I'll take really good care of him. He's a yellow warbler. But he's just a baby. Look!" She thrust the quivering body toward his face. "You can see the grey down pokin' out under his yellow feathers."

"Look, Shell. Most wild creatures can't live outside, well, you know, nature"

"We need a box, Pop."

"Put it down, Shelley. We'll watch it on the ground for a while and see how it does."

She stared at him. She continued to cradle the little body in her hands.

"Shelley, I said put it down." Firmer now. A short, sharp intake of breath was her only response. She turned her back toward him as she slowly lowered herself to the ground. She set the baby bird on the earth beside her. She stayed sitting, her back facing him.

He sat back in his broken chair. He hated when Shelley didn't talk. She usually talked too much. He reached for his beer and lit another cigarette. He couldn't regain the moment of calm. It had passed. The little bird was trying to move, but kept listing to one side. One wing showed signs of hurt. Shelley was making some sort of murmuring noises. The bird seemed to be listening to her. He wondered how she knew to make those sounds. Shelley's hair was completely tangled in the back. He wondered when she had last washed and combed it. Why didn't Mrs. Thibodeau do something about it? Maybe looking after Shelley's hygiene wasn't part of her job. He was probably lucky that she even watched Shelley until he got home from the plant every day. He should remember to remind Shelley that she needed to bathe and wash.

"What do you want for supper, Shelley?"

She didn't turn to answer. "Nothing, Pop. I want to mind my bird. Make sure he's okay, and make sure Mac doesn't trouble him."

He gave in first. She probably knew he would. "Tell you what, Shell. I'll make us some hotdogs. If that little bird is still alive after we eat, we'll set it up in a box after that so we can watch it real close through the evening."

She turned. She smiled. "OK, Pop. But we'll eat the hotdogs outside here, right? It's real nice out, anyways."

He nodded in agreement. She turned to murmur some more to the injured bird. He felt incredibly tired. He rubbed out his cigarette on the ground. He stood. He looked at his daughter sitting on the earth, huddled over, watching her bird. He had an urge to touch her—put an arm around her shoulders or rub her hair. He moved to the back door and went into the house.

Inside, the smell again threatened to overwhelm him. He took hotdog buns out of the freezer to thaw and threw some hotdogs into a pot of water that he set on the stove.

He went down the hall to the room where Alice lay in bed. He approached the bed cautiously. She wasn't asleep, but she was lying still—her eyes seeing pictures he couldn't see. She was more tired than when he had first arrived home.

"Alice, I think I'd best change that colostomy bag now." He rolled the sheets down off her shoulders to her waist. Her eyes looked at him and her lips muttered unknown words, to things or people not present in the room. Her arms appeared no larger than the hot dogs he had just dumped in the water. He changed the bag. He thought Mrs. Thibodeau should have done it. He knew that one day he would not be able to control his desire to gag, and Alice would realize why he was gagging. He wrapped the waste bag in newspaper and left Alice's room. He went out the door in the kitchen and threw the wadded newspaper into the same silver pail that contained Mrs. Thibodeau's pork chops.

The hotdogs were boiling, their insides appearing like a hernia through the ripped skin. He liked to boil them hard to know they were cooked. He took a couple of hotdog buns out of the plastic bag. He slapped mustard, catsup, and relish on each and put them on plates. He poured a glass of milk for Shelley and got another beer for himself. He went outside. He thought he could smell the silver garbage pail. He pulled the lawn chair further away from it.

"You wanna share this chair with me to eat, Shelley?"

"No thanks, Pop. I'll eat here with my bird. I think he's getting better."

He took her plate to her. He looked at the injured bird. Surprisingly, it did look a little brighter. Its little head was cocking from side to side. The movement was jaunty and the bird's eyes were curious. Maybe he had misjudged the little creature's resilience.

"I'll get you a box you can put him in so it'll be safe while you eat."

Shelley grinned as she reached for her hotdog plate.

He returned outside with a shoebox. It had come from Shelley's room. He found it empty, under her bed. He rarely went into Shelley's room. Her room was sparse. A few pictures were tacked on her wall. They were drawings she'd done at school, painted crudely. They made no sense to him. The shoebox had obviously been stashed under the bed for some time—it was dusty and the cardboard felt soft, atrophied. He wondered when Shelley had last gotten new shoes. At her age, feet must grow quickly.

Shelley pulled up a few weeds and scraped up some earth to put in the bottom of the box. Then, she carefully put in her baby bird. Again, the little head twisted from side to side, the eyes looking brighter and more eager.

They ate in silence. He began to feel a weak wind coming off the river across the road from their house. Maybe it would blow out some of the heavy air. He heard Shelley give a startled yelp and looked over at her in time to see the little bird perched precariously on the edge of the shoebox. It rocked back and forth like it was walking a balance beam. It reminded him of Alice when she'd tried wearing really high heels with her wedding dress. She'd spent the day clinging to his arm and teetering helplessly whenever she'd let go.

"Look at him, Pop! He's trying to hop. He's getting real strong!"

"Yeah, he's doing real good, Shelley. He's a gutsy little guy, I'll give him that!"

As if in confirmation, the bird jumped off the side of the shoebox. Its balance still wasn't good and it fell for a moment, but now could right itself. It tentatively dug into the earth with one foot, looking for insects. One wing looked crooked and damaged.

Shelley laughed. "He's amazing! Mrs. Thibodeau says you have to be some tough to get by in this life, so I guess he's going to be all right!"

He was bothered that Shelley quoted Mrs. Thibodeau. The little bird hopped, then continued to scratch in the dirt. Shelley put out her hand toward it. Its wings flapped and it lifted itself into the air for almost a second before banging back down on the earth. It was a Herculean effort. Shelley's face froze with her eyes widened and her mouth making a perfect circle. He laughed.

"That little bird's sure lookin' good, Shelley."

"He wants to fly, but he can't."

"Not yet, but he's tryin.' Just let him keep doing things his own way."

They watched the bird together. He did not know how long he sat with his daughter watching the struggles of the little creature. The afternoon was turning into dusk. The air started to cool. The little bird made several

more attempts to fly, never getting farther than a few feet at a time. It would fall back to the ground, lie still for a moment or two, then collect itself and try again. He and Shelley kept vigil. They didn't talk. He didn't smoke. His beer sat untouched by his chair. Then, the little bird lifted itself into the air and flew almost five metres into a stand of scraggly cedars.

Shelley gasped. She clapped her hands and her legs gyrated in a strange little movement almost like a dance. Together, they walked quietly toward the cedar. The little yellow form was slumped on a lower branch, its sides heaving. It looked at them with head cocked. Its eyes closed for a moment and it rested.

"I can't believe he managed that. Now, if he'd just move further up the tree, he'd be safe for the night."

They stayed by the cedar, standing quietly, and in time the little bird lifted its head and studied the tree. It started a slow progression along the low branch on which it had perched to the next branch, and then the next, and to the next, working its way upwards.

"That's it," he said, but he was talking to the bird, not Shelley. "Keep going just a little more. ..." The bird missed a branch and fell back to a lower one. The two spectators groaned in unison. But again, after resting, the bird began to ascend to a higher, safer part of the cedar.

"I can barely see him any more," Shelley said, squinting.

"He's up there—look." He pointed to a spot above both their heads. "He'll be safe there, Shelley. You were right. He's tough enough to survive."

"I was real sad for that bird, Dad." Shelley's voice sounded choked just for a moment, "but I guess we saved him. Now he can get strong and sing and have babies."

Get strong, sing and have babies. Why not? Maybe that's what birds do. He looked at his daughter who was looking up at him, her eyes bright. He looked away.

"I guess it's probably way past your bedtime, Shelley. Best go in now. Say goodnight to your mother."

Shelley turned away. "Okay. Thanks for helping me so much, Pop. I'm glad he's saved." She walked toward the kitchen door.

"Hey!" he called. "Comb your hair before you get into bed."

She grinned at him and went inside.

He went back to the lawn chair. His beer was warm. He lit a cigarette and smoked it slowly. He closed his eyes.

The world was almost completely dark when he opened his eyes again. The air was getting downright chilly. He could smell the river in the wind. He stretched and smiled to himself. He got out of the lawn chair

stiffly and picked up the plates that had held their hotdogs. He took them inside. The house was silent. For months the living room had also been his bedroom. He was about to throw the blankets on the couch, but stopped. He went back outside and crossed to the cedar. He looked up to where he had last seen the splash of yellow against the green needles. He looked, but the night obscured his vision. He hoped their little bird was sleeping well.

At the base of the tree he found the body. A little yellow bird, dead. He knew it was their bird. He found Shelley's shoebox by the lawn chair. He put the body into the box. He would get rid of it while Shelley slept. He carried the box to the silver garbage can by the back door. The smell of it paralyzed him. He held the box. He held it a long time. Mosquitoes buzzed at his limbs and he stood holding the box. There were bats flying close about, but still he held the box. Then, dragging his arm across his eyes, he went to the shed and found a shovel. He buried the box under the cedars.