

*Marcia Schonfeld*

## CANARY BIRD

It was that Canary Bird was supposed to talk and never did, and that I said it was parakeets that are supposed to talk and not canaries, and Rosemary's freckle-faced insistence that it was canaries that are supposed to talk as well as parakeets that began the end of a great many things and the start of some new ones.

Among those things which this first, small, feathered disagreement brought to a halt was the smooth flow of intellectual equality that had always existed between my friends and me. Never in all our years of mudpies and horsey reins, rainy afternoons in one another's basements, hopscotch, hide-and-seek, Red Rover Cross Over, coyboys, indians and ring-a-leevio had either of us ever flung a single "Dumbell!" at each other or even a "Show-off!" We were the best of friends. We never left each other flat, nor ever wanted to.

But in this instance of intellectual disparity, for the first time I wished for a friend who could agree with and appreciate my knowledge. I had no Illustrated World Encyclopedia or Little Golden Book of Birds with which to prove my point, but still I knew as sure as April showers bring May flowers that I was right and Rosemary was wrong. And though for an instant I panicked and allowed the possibility to enter my head that perhaps Catholic canaries do indeed talk and Jewish canaries do not, in my heart I knew this was not the case, and anyway, if it were, I was quite sure it would be the reverse.

This budding sense of divergence between Catholics and Jews had actually been intruding upon my simple life for quite some time. Ever since Rosemary's father had one Saturday afternoon drunkenly parked his car right in the middle of their front lawn rather than in the

driveway, and my mother and father and grandmother witnessing this shocking display from under the gentle weeping willow tree on our front lawn had exchanged glances which, like little dotted lines, separated our world from theirs, and torn it off with my grandmother's condescending muttered curse of, "Irish!", the bud had been growing. A few weeks later, when in the A&P I asked my mother why we didn't buy a gallon jar of mayonnaise the way Rosemary's mother always did, and was told in a low, whispering voice that Jews don't need so much mayonnaise, it bloomed. I started then to carefully observe the life habits of Rosemary and her family in contrast to my very own.

For one thing, they drank almost exclusively, children and adults alike, out of jelly jars: we used real glasses. Secondly, in order to get these jelly jars they consumed vast quantities of grape jelly; on toast in the morning, with peanut butter at lunch, and as topping on brick ice cream and graham crackers in the evening: we ate danish. A third point of cultural departure concerned eating utensils. Rosemary's family used stainless steel with light green plastic handles: my own favored silver. And it was not that we were any richer than the Powers (they had a new new car, we had a new used car) or that we were putting on a show. It was, as my mother put it, simply a matter of good taste. Catholics, with their turquoise Easter hats and plaster Virgin Marys, had none; that was a basic tenet of their faith. And my careful inspection, one quiet afternoon, of Canary Bird's cage seemed to bear this out:

It was a golden-barred pagoda. Inside two round, red and green plastic rimmed mirrors hung at either end with little blue scallop-shell feed troughs and water troughs beneath. An ivory cuttlebone pecking block in the shape of an egg hung from a cedar perch stick, and a pale yellow plastic ladder led down to the newspaper floor, in the center of which sat a small, rotating ferris wheel with tiny silver jingle bells attached to its lavender struts. Canary Bird stood on his rocking perch, nipping at a honey-seed whale hung above his head. And even in the face of my own playground tastes, I realized it was a shrine to all my mother's accusations.

His cage was hung by an open kitchen window, and despite the fact that Canary Bird only sang and never uttered a word, everyone, including Rosemary, adored him. Mrs. Power said he sounded sweeter

than a choir boy on Christmas Eve, and, indeed, when he hopped to his highest perching rod and opened his tiny golden beak to sing, even the wild birds that flocked to the yard beyond the window ceased their noisy flapping dashes and settled down in melodies upon the telephone wires to listen to his song. And even as far away as three houses down, my own mother and grandmother, knitting baby booties, rocking in the pale dappled sun that fell in shifting slits through the long, thin, light green leaves of our willow tree, had to agree he sounded very sweet.

It was just this sweetness though that constituted according to my mother and grandmother's, and now my own, catalogue of Catholic cultural oddities, one of the most grievous failings of the Church of Rome -- sugar. If Jews could possibly be accused of using too much horse radish at times, Catholics, we believed, could be condemned to a life in the salt mines for their wanton squandering of sugar. They not only used it on everything from classic American rice crispies and grapefruit halves through slices of toast and butter, cinnamon and apple wedges, but added it to grape juice, orange juice and even, it was rumored, milk. Not only that, but the children ate it plain by the tablespoon full out of heavy, beige Woolworth sugar bowls.

"They all have worms," said my grandmother, wrapping a snake of pale yellow yarn around her fat, pink forefinger. Knit one, purl two. Knit one, purl two.

"I wouldn't be surprised," said my mother, looking down the block at all the other houses on the summer afternoon.

"Rosemary doesn't have worms," I said, loyal to the end.

"I wouldn't be so sure," said my grandmother, her silver needles flashing. "I don't like you eating off their dishes."

"Oh, Mama," said my mother, ripping out a row, and my grandmother sensing silence was in order, looked at me with her great big blue pussycat eyes changing size through her bifocals and nodded her head sagely.

The possibility that she might have worms raised Rosemary in my sight somewhat, though, due to our earlier disagreement on Canary Bird's ability to talk, I didn't venture to open another scientific discussion with her. Instead, noting that she did seem to squirm an awful lot when we went to the cartoons Saturday afternoons, and that

she spent most of the time she had to wait for her turn at potsy plucking at the seat of her red plaid shorts, I decided that in the future I would pay closer attention to what my grandmother said; and continued my silent religious observations.

Bread crusts, I noted, were never eaten by the children of Catholic homes. Instead they remained upon the round white plates like clumsily drawn outlines of tiny houses, purple grape jelly staining the little white bread waves left by bites along the light brown crust. These were then torn into bits and stuffed in an empty, cut-down Silvercup bread wrapper to be fed the following day to the wild birds. For this ethnic fault (not cleaning up your plate despite the spectre of starving Armenians) I was thankful, for it was my job each morning when I came over to play and Rosemary was still upstairs making her bed and tidying her room, to take these stale bread crusts and crumbs out into the back yard and feed the waiting birds.

Sparrows and robin red breasts, pigeons and starlings and, so startling when they swooped in like witches screaming, occasional crows, and giant blue jays, red cardinals; all came twirling and swirling about over-head, plunging out of the blue, and lunging and diving like dervishes suddenly to the ground to sweep up a bit of crust and, curling still about in the air, soar off again, climbing. Pigeons caught crumbs as I flung them like coins, and tiny, puff-chested sparrows hopped up and down in little clusters, gathering what they dropped. Coo and cheep and cheewet, and caws like rusty bicycle chains ransacked the low hot early summer quiet until the last handful of crumbs had arced in the air and sifted, silently, back to earth. I folded the waxed paper bag in half and then in half again and took it back into the kitchen.

Canary Bird had seen it all, and jerkily thrusting his little yellow head first to one side and then to the other, he began to sing. Mrs. Power gave him new seed and cool, new water.

Rosemary said that she had two aunts who were nuns and that they would be coming to visit. She said that this was to be their very last visit anywhere; and that afterwards they would go back to their high-walled convent never to come out again; they would spend the rest of their lives in absolute silence praying for the souls of all the world's sinners.

"How come?" I asked.

"For their salvation," she replied.

And I inquired no further, assuming that the nuns were praying for all the unbelievers in the world to join the Salvation Army and that I, by dint of the fact that Jews do not pray with their hands pressed palms together, could never really take part. Rosemary said they were bald.

Of course I told my family of the impending visit of the bald-headed nuns. My mother thought they probably had crew cuts. My grandmother said they never made, and they never bathed either; that was why even though their faces always looked so pale and pinched and skinny, their bodies were always big like boulders: caked-up dirt. My mother told my grandmother not to tell me things like that. And my grandmother said, "Hmmp," and said it was shameful that I only had goys to play with. And I said, "Rosemary's my best friend," and stuck my tongue out at my grandmother. And my mother said, "Don't stick your tongue out at your grandmother." And my grandmother peeled a banana and said, "See what she learns from them." And my mother peeled a banana also and said, "Thank God I'm getting away from this," for she and my father were taking a three week automobile trip through upper New York State and would be away for the whole of the nuns' visit. Only my grandmother and I would be witness to the blessed event.

The nuns arrived, emerging like two unfolding pyramids of black tableclothes from a wood paneled station wagon taxi shortly after my parents left. They stood on the narrow island of green grass that grew between the curb and sidewalk, gripping their big, black, rectangular suitcases and peering up at the house. Mr. and Mrs. Power and Rosemary in a pink checked dress burst from the front door and came quickly down the red brick walk with long, official strides. Mr. Power shook the small pink hands that jutted from the dry black folds and took their two suitcases up to the house. Mrs. Power kissed each nun on the cheek and then, with the flat of her hand on the back of her neck, propelled Rosemary forward and presented her to the nuns. Rosemary made a little curtsy and whispered, "Hello, Sister," and ducked to the side. Mrs. Power looked back up the walk to the house and saying, "Well, well, come on in and sit down," led the nuns away.

Secreted among the azalea bushes of the house across the street, I watched it all. Only Rosemary, who had helped me choose the best spot for viewing this momentous occasion, knew I was there, but soldier that she was, in no way during the entire greeting ceremony did she betray me, not so much as by a secret ear-tug signal. We had arranged that I would happen to walk by the house shortly after the nuns had arrived and that she would happen to see me walk by and would then call me in.

Thus I lingered among the azaleas to a count of one hundred Mississippi and then crawled, out, down the lawn, crossed the street, retreated to the corner, turned around, and carefully sauntered back up the block. When I reached the edge of Powers' green front lawn Rosemary called out "Hi!" and I raced across the grass, jumped up the two front steps and tumbled in the door.

They were both, upon close inspection, very tall, even when sitting. And Sister Robert Maryjane, whose long thin nose almost crossed her little, upturned mouth to form an anchor on her face, called me "Yes, dear," and asked if I went to school with Rosemary. I told her no. And then she said, patting the thick black pad somewhere beneath which lurked her knees, "Oh, but you're the same age," and her heavy, polished black rosary beads, hanging in two loops from her belt, clicked like dice. Sister Therese Marie asked if my pinto cowboy shirt was real pony skin. I blushed and whispered to the tips of my red sneakers, "No."

"Oh, good," said Sister Therese Marie, scratching behind a gentle lump that must have been her ear, "I'd hate to think of all those ponies dying."

"Sister is very fond of animals," Sister Robert Maryjane explained.

And Mrs. Power, coming back into the living room from the kitchen, quickly exclaimed, "Well, then Sister will want to see our bird," and led the way out again.

"Isn't he a dear!" said Sister Robert Maryjane, coming close to the pagoda. She put her lips up to the bars and made three, dry little kisses in the direction of Canary Bird. He hopped to the far end of his cage and ducked his head in the water trough. He took it out and shook it. A drop landed on Sister Robert Maryjane's nose, rolled down to the tip, and fell off. She withdrew her face. "Look! He's taking his little bath,"

she said, patting her nose with a pink paper napkin which Mrs. Power had handed her.

"He's supposed to talk but he doesn't," said Rosemary.

Sister Therese Marie, standing off, closed one eye and squinted at the cage. "He's a canary, isn't he?" she asked.

"Of course he is, the little dear," said Sister Robert Maryjane, the tip of her ghost white forefinger thrust between the bars of his cage. Canary Bird began to twitter.

"I believe it's only parakeets that are supposed to talk," said Sister Therese Marie. "Canaries just sing, I believe."

"I just love little canaries," said Sister Robert Maryjane, wiggling her finger. Canary Bird hopped next to it and pecked at the immaculate, translucent fingernail.

Mrs. Power handed her a little orange box of bird feed and said, "Here, give it to him. He likes it." Sister Robert Maryjane took her finger from his cage and dipped it into the little box, bringing up a pinch of grain. She threw it into the cage. Canary Bird fluttered to the side, and then, cautiously, reached his neck out and down and picked up a seed.

"You're hungry, aren't you, aren't you," said Sister Robert Maryjane, throwing him another little pinch. Canary Bird quickly pecked it up. She turned to Mrs. Power. "How much can I give him?" she asked.

"I think another pinch will be enough for now," said Mrs. Power. "We don't want to spoil him," she added, and she and Sister Robert Maryjane laughed as the big black nun showered another tiny pinch of golden grain into the bird cage.

Outside, on the other side of the wide, white windowsill, silhouetted against the blue sky, throwing blue shadows on the green grass, late afternoon pigeons circled around and around, flashing pink and then tan and then silver and blue.

Mrs. Power wondered if the Sisters might like to rest a bit before dinner. They said they would.

And outside then in the backyard, playing catch with a brown corduroy bean bag, Rosemary told me they weren't really going to rest; that nuns never rest. But that they were going to pray for everyone who didn't pray. And I wondered, catching the dull, bean-filled lump with a bump upon my belly, if that meant me.

My grandmother hearing this news at supper that night said, "It had better not!" And that those busybodies also better not butt in and start making prayers for people who didn't need them. To which I objected that Rosemary had said that they prayed for *everyone* who didn't pray because *everyone* needed prayers or else they wouldn't go to heaven. To which my grandmother cracked a small white egg on the edge of a green glass bowl and as the yellow yoke slid down the side, muttered, "What do they know about heaven. Heaven! Hah. They should live so long. Heaven!"

To which I replied, "Sister Therese Marie says only parakeets are supposed to talk. Canaries only sing."

And she continued, "Sister. Sister. What right have you to call them Sister. It sounds terrible, a good little Jewish girl like you, Sister-ing everyone. You don't have to call anybody Sister."

"Mrs. Power says that's what you're supposed to call a nun."

"Nun. Nuns!" said my grandmother, cracking another egg. "Nun," she repeated and then fell silent. She took a fork and began beating the eggs in the bowl, blinking her eyes rapidly. "Nun. Hah!" she said; then looking straight and steady out at me, her eyes bigger on the top than on the bottom, asked with a gleam, "They're not your sisters are they?"

I answered "no".

"So then there's no reason on earth for you to call them Sister is there," she concluded triumphantly and told me to go wash my hands for supper.

"What do you think about canaries talking," I asked first.

"It's parakeets," she said. "Now go on, And on both sides."

In the evenings, just before the sun turned red and sank beyond the houses two blocks down, when all the birds were streaking low like darts across the avenues of air between the thick leaved trees that lined our street, and down below, upon the warm, gray asphalt the paling pink orbs of several games of catch-a-fly-is-up whizzed through the gathering darkness, the two tall nuns would take a stroll around the block, slowly, all their garments swaying, and their rosaries like beaded curtains swinging at their sides, until, by the time they were back to where they started from night had begun, and where they ended and the shadow of the trees began, no one could tell.



In the mornings when I came to call for Rosemary and she was still busy making her bed and tidying her room, Sister Therese Marie would help feed the wild birds, holding the waxed paper bag and breaking the stale crusts into bird-sized bite-sized pieces for me to fling around and around like sparkling water dropping from a sprinkler. At the kitchen window Sister Robert Maryjane cleaned Canary Bird's cage, changing the newspaper on the floor and refilling his water and feed troughs. Sister Therese Marie handed me a fist full of the last crumbs. I threw them toward a troop of milling sparrows, who scattered, flew up into the air, floated back down and began eating. Canary Bird swung on his perch in his clean cage singing. Sister Therese Marie folded the bag and slipped it into the pocket of her habit. She put her hand up to her brow and peered toward the kitchen window at Canary Bird. She shook her head thoughtfully. "It must be torture," she said, and dropped her hand flat to her side. She grabbed her rosary and twisted it around her index finger. "I'd hate to be a caged canary, wouldn't you," she suddenly burst out, and, without waiting for me to say yes or no, quickly went on, her words racing out in breathless rushes with sudden stops and restless, rushing startings. "Imagine being cooped up in a cage all day and seeing all these big free birds out here. Never to fly. With a little tin roof for a sky. Oh, I think it's terrible to keep birds. Poor Canary Bird. Poor little prisoner."

Sister Robert Maryjane called from the window, "Sister, when you're through can you help me with some figuring?"

Sister Therese Marie sighed and shrugged her shoulders at me and raised her eyebrows and lowered them again and shook her head and then, turning around, changed her voice and called back, "Certainly, Sister," and went inside.

When Rosemary came out I asked her if nuns are allowed to hate. Rosemary said not at all; that they are full of Jesus' love and see him everywhere and so they can't hate anything. Not even heretics. Well, I said, I heard Sister Therese Marie on two separate occasions say she hated something. And Rosemary, bouncing a ball right on the green grass so that it angled off to the side and rolled away from her, said I must have misheard her because nuns don't hate. And I said, Well, I heard Sister Therese Marie on the very first day she came say she *hated* to think of all those ponies dying, and that this very morning she said

she'd *hate* to be a bird. And Rosemary said, Oh, of course, they can hate something terrible like ponies dying. In fact they should, because everyone should hate something horrible like that. But as for being a bird, well, she guessed that was Sister Therese Marie's own private opinion and she wasn't talking for the whole Church — though she wasn't really sure if nuns could have their own private opinions; and perhaps Sister Therese Marie had meant that she'd hate being a bird because then she couldn't be a nun and serve Jesus, and it would be all right then, hating for that reason. And I, seeing the chance to make two points at once, said that Sister Therese Marie had said she'd hate to be a canary and that my grandmother also said it was parakeets that talk and not canaries. And Rosemary said she'd ask her own mother about it later and meanwhile did I want to play *One Two Three A-lary, I Saw Mistress Mary Sitting On A Bum-ba-lary, One Two Three A-lary* or did I want to play *A My Name Is Alice And My Husband's Name Is Alan, We Come From Alaska And We Sell Apples*; and did I want to play in front of her house or my house? I chose *A My Name Is Alice* in front of her house; and she said that was exactly what she wanted to do, too.

One Sunday some cousins of Rosemary's came to visit to meet the nuns, and just when they were leaving, and the cousins' mother had her hand on the silver front door handle of their maroon car and Rosemary's father was slapping the cousins' father on the shoulder, saying, "Shouldn't be too much traffic in your direction at this hour," Sister Robert Maryjane reached deep into the thick black folds of her habit and brought forth a handful of tiny, shiny silver medals and gave one to each of the cousins. I stood on tip toe to see them better. They glittered in the sun in her hand. Sister Therese Marie coughed and said softly, "Sister, I think you've forgotten someone," and nodded toward me. Sister Robert Maryjane said, "Oh, well," and handed me a little medal too.

"Thanks," I said and folded it closed, tight in my palm.

"It's a Saint Christopher medal," Rosemary informed me at my elbow. "I have three."

My grandmother was not at all impressed by the medal's clean shininess, nor was she charmed by the pudgy little baby who perched on St. Christopher's shoulders and clutched at his silver hair with one chubby hand, while he bounced the world up and down in his other. In

fact, in no way did she treat the medal with any of that graciousness at receiving presents, whether you like them or not, which she was always urging. It was as though she were me given a gift of underwear for my birthday: total disapproval.

"It's not right," she kept repeating, weighing the tiny medal in her big, red palm, then bringing it up close to the double lens of her glasses like a jeweler. "It's just not right at all. You're a little Jewish girl. I don't understand those people. They should know better than to give you a thing like this."

"Sister Robert Maryjane gave them to Rosemary's cousins also."

"And don't you Sister me. I don't want to hear any more of it," she yelled, and making a cage-like fist around the tiny medal, pounded on the kitchen table so hard the salt and pepper shakers jumped. "Come with me," she said and led me down the long, hushed, narrow hallway to the bathroom. She flicked on the switch: the tiles flashed white and black on the floor: the light bulb hummed. She took my hand and steered me over to the toilet and lifted the sky blue lid. We looked down into the water. My grandmother held her fist like a cloud above the bowl. "You're a Jewish little girl," she said slowly. "It's not right for you to have a Catholic medal."

"Why?"

Her fist trembled. "Because you're not supposed to. What would happen if you got run over and they found this in your pocket? Do you know what would happen?"

"What?"

"They'd take you to a Catholic hospital, that's what would happen. They'd take you to a Catholic hospital because they'd see this medal and they'd say, This is a Catholic little girl, and they wouldn't let your mommy and daddy in to visit you or bring you any toys, and they'd make you drink blood every time you wanted to eat. That's what would happen," she said, and lowered her fist. "And that's just one reason why this medal is no good for you. Do you understand?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"So we're going to get rid of this bad medal so nothing bad will happen to you," she continued, and with that she lifted her fist over the bowl again, and sprung her thick fingers wide apart.

The little silver medal clung to the palm of her hand for an instant, then let go and toppled end over end into the waters below. It floated gently down and down, and then my grandmother reached across, grasped the cold metal handle and flushed. Water rushed into the bowl, and the tiny Saint Christopher medal flashed like a fish as it swirled and gurgled up and around and down again and finally out of sight. Slowly the bowl refilled and my grandmother left the bathroom, saying, "Think about it."

I closed the door behind her and went back to the bowl. The water was calm as a lake. I got on my knees and dipped one arm down and broke the cold water surface with the tips of my fingers plunging through, and felt around the slithery ghost white sides of the bowl. I wiggled my fingers like worms through the water way down deep, way past the point where you can see, and sought the medal. It was most definitely gone. Slowly I withdrew my arm, and got up and ran it for a very long time, from elbow to wrist, under the hot water tap; and only when my grandmother called to come on to supper, did I carefully dry my bright red arm on the big blue towel that hung on the back of the tall white door, thinking about it.

The next morning when Sister Therese Marie and I were out in the yard feeding the impatient wild birds, and through the open window we could hear Sister Robert Maryjane clucking to Canary Bird as she cleaned his cage, under a shower of mis-thrown crumbs I said to her, "I lost my Saint Christopher medal last night."

Sister Therese Marie brushed gold from her habit. "Are you sure? Have you looked everywhere?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "I'm sure."

"In all your pockets and the cuffs of your shorts?"

"I know it's not there."

"Where do you think you lost it?"

I took another handful of crumbs and sprinkled them on the grass for the sparrows. "In the bathroom," I told her.

"Oh," said Sister Therese Marie, sprinkling a handful of crumbs herself. "Well, that shouldn't be too hard a place to find something, should it? You just have to check all the ledges and shelves and medicine cabinet, and behind the bottles and brushes; all along the

floor, and under the bathmat, behind the toilet, in the hamper. Everywhere. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll find it," she said with so much hope and with such a soft touch of her hand upon the top of my head, that I told her it had fallen down the toilet and was gone forever.

"Well, it really is lost then, isn't it," she said, and quickly added, "from you at least. For, of course, from the toilet it's flushed right out to sea and there's no telling but that some hungry fish won't gobble it up and sail away, until one day, miles and miles and miles away from here, it's caught, and some little girl some place else will be sitting down to supper and put her fork into her fish, and what do you think she'll come up with?"

"My Saint Christopher medal?"

"Right you are!" shouted Sister Therese Marie so loud that Sister Robert Maryjane stuck her head out the window, asking, "What, Sister?"

"Nothing," called Sister Therese Marie and she handed me the rest of the crumbs, explaining that actually it was very right and fitting that my Saint Christopher medal should have met the fate it did. "After all, Saint Christopher is the patron saint of travelers," she said, "and what could be more in keeping with his duty than to be traveling himself. Don't you think so?"

Indeed I did. And so thrilled was I with the prospect of my medal swimming around the world in the belly of a fish, that the tiny medal grew more in my estimation and I asked Sister Therese Marie how I could get another.

"Just ask Sister Robert Maryjane politely," she advised. "I'm sure she'll give it to you. She loves handing them out."

And so I asked, and she, with the two little cross hooks of the anchor on her face turned more sharply up, dug into her habit and brought forth a glowing medal.

That evening, showing my grandmother my new medal, I explained to her that Saint Christopher was the patron saint of travelers and that I was willing to risk the possibility of mistaken religious identification by carrying the little medal as a good luck charm for my mother and father on their auto trip: and I further told her all about how Saint Christopher used to carry people across a river and how one day a little boy appeared on the shore and how when Saint Christopher tried to

pick him up he was bowed down by the tremendous weight of the child; and that this little boy was Jesus and the reason he weighed so much was that he was carrying all the sins of the world in his hands: and then I told her all about the medal-eating fish and the foreign little girl, and was going to say how fitting and right it all was when she suddenly held up the palm of her hand like a policeman and yelled, "Stop it! Stop it! I don't want to hear anymore. It's not right," and grabbing the medal from my hand, marched into the bathroom with it and threw it in the toilet and flushed it away, saying, "There!"

I had no qualms. Soon Saint Christopher would be safe at sea.

In the morning I confessed to Sister Therese Marie that I had lost my medal again.

Sister Therese Marie tapped the side of her nose with her finger, sighed and said, "Another fish well fed. I guess you'd better ask Sister for another."

And Sister Robert Maryjane said, when I asked her for another, "That's odd," but gave me one nonetheless.

And, when impressed with the generosity of the nuns, that evening I showed my grandmother my newest medal, she rolled her eyes to heaven and called, "No! No!", before stomping off into the bathroom to flush it far away.

So it went, day after day and night after night; I would tell Sister Therese Marie I'd lost my medal, and ask Sister Robert Maryjane for another, and later on, like a great big round-robin game, present it to my grandmother. And she would shake her head and mutter about *those* people having their nerve, and how she'd go tell them just what she thought of them except that no Jewish lady had to go calling on any nun for any reason, and finally, after giving me her marble, blue-eyed stare, would fling it in the toilet and pull the handle.

Mrs. Power said it was very nice of the Sisters to keep giving me the medals, and Rosemary asked if I was letting them fall down the toilet on purpose. I said no. And she said that was good because to do so would be a sin. And I said that Sister Therese Marie said it was only right that a Saint Christopher medal should travel, and Rosemary said that she saw a book in the library that said canaries talk. And I said, Liar, Liar, house on fire. And she refused to talk to me for the rest of

the day and so I spent it sitting on the back porch next to Sister Therese Marie, unknitting a skein of yellow yarn. Off in the kitchen Canary Bird stood on his ferris wheel and sang and sang.

"It's such a sad song he's singing I think," said Sister Therese Marie after a while. "It sounds like let me free, let me free, to me."

Sister Robert Maryjane, reading a geometry book, looked up and said she thought Canary Bird sounded quite content. "He sings with cheer," she said.

"I'm sure he'd be happier out with the other birds," said Sister Therese Marie, snapping a yellow knot apart.

"He's too small," answered Sister Robert Maryjane. "He wouldn't know how to take care of himself. And he's never been free. He'd be hurt out there."

"How do you know?" said Sister Therese Marie, and off in the distance I heard my grandmother calling me to come home for supper.

Rosemary said the nuns would be leaving soon and never come back again. I liked Sister Therese Marie very much and would miss her a lot. She and I seemed to agree on a great many things. I wanted to give her something to take back to her convent from me. I asked Rosemary if nuns could accept presents. Rosemary said she thought they could not. "What about Christmas?" I asked; and Rosemary thought that, yes, they could accept presents at Christmas, but that that was a very special occasion and the only time.

Perhaps then, I thought, I could do something especially nice for Sister Therese Marie to show her I liked her, something that would make her especially glad. But she had no errands to run or balloons to blow up or any of the sort of tasks I did really well. I asked my grandmother what she thought I could do as a going away present for a nun. "Give her a great big good-bye from me," she said, and found this very funny. It was no help.

The day of their departure drew nearer and nearer, and I wondered and wondered and wondered what I could do. Until one evening quite close to their going, as I stood in the bathroom watching the little silver Saint Christopher medal flutter away to the bottom of the bowl like a free floating feather, I was reminded of all that Sister Therese Marie had said about Canary Bird; and of all her true beliefs that he would, indeed, be far more happy out in the open world; and remembering

how she had called him a poor little prisoner and heard his song as a plea to be free, I knew then as the gurgling water grew calm, what I could do. I would release Canary Bird.

At last it was the day before they were to leave. My grandmother said she would be glad to see the back of them. I received a glossy picture postcard of Niagara Falls from my mother and father. They were having a wonderful time and missed me and my grandmother and would be home soon. They would bring me souvenirs and red felt banners from every city they'd been in. My grandmother said, "You see how nice your mommy and daddy are to you."

Sister Therese Marie had gone to the Greyhound station with Mrs. Power to pick up the nuns' bus tickets back to their convent. Rosemary was making her bed, I emptied the bag of crusts and crumbs on to the lawn and hid behind an overturned green striped beach chair, watching the window where Sister Robert Maryjane was changing Canary Bird's water and waited for her to go away. A mob of big and little birds swarmed over the lawn screaming. She was gone from the window. Quick like an indian I stole across the yard, up onto the porch and into the house. Holding my breath, I tip-toed into the vast, mid-morning kitchen.

Canary Bird was looking at himself in one of his little mirrors. Occasionally he pecked at its colored rim. Cautiously I approached the cage. I put my hand on the door. He jumped away and fluttered up to his rocking perch. Golden grains rose in the air from the tips of his wings. "Do you want to be free?" I whispered, jiggling the golden latch. "Do you want to fly away, Canary Bird?" Canary Bird cocked his head to the side and blinked his eyes. He looked the other way and swung. I lifted the latch. The door flew open. We heard the birds outside. Canary Bird hopped down to the front of his cage and poked his head out the door. "Come on," I whispered. "Come on out." He looked to the left and to the right and at me. Then he jumped around and hopped back to the other side of his cage and pecked at his scallop-shell feed trough. "Come on," I urged, growing impatient. "It's your last chance." Canary Bird kept on eating.

Behind me Sister Robert Maryjane, her rosary slapping her side like a sword, coughed and beamed. I slammed the little cage door shut and ran right out of the house.



Sister Therese Marie had been wrong. Canary Bird didn't want to be free. Sister Robert Maryjane had been right. He liked life in his little pagoda. Perhaps even Rosemary was right; maybe there were some canaries meant to talk. Sister Therese Marie had been wrong. And she was probably wrong about the Saint Christopher medal sailing the seas as well. It probably never would be eaten by a fish and no little girl far away would ever find it.

When I came home that evening for supper my grandmother asked me where my medal was. I told her I didn't have a new one. "Why not?" she asked. I told her I hadn't asked for another. My grandmother smiled and patted my head. "That's a good little Jewish girl," she said. I started to go down the hall to the bathroom to wash my hands for supper. "Wait," she said. "I have a present for you," and she took a tiny white box out of her apron pocket and put it on the kitchen table. I looked at it. "Go ahead, open it," she urged. "It's for you." I reached out and pulled the top off. A tiny shiny golden star nestled in a fluff of cotton. "It's a Star of David," my grandmother explained, lifting it up by its slender chain. "So you'll know what you are next time." She put the chain around my neck. I felt it with my fingers. "What do you say when someone gives you a present?" she asked.

"Thank you," I said.

"That's a good girl," said my grandmother. "Now go wash your hands like a nice girl for supper."

I went down the hall to the bathroom. Golden light trickled through the pebbled window. The white toilet bowl gleamed. I closed the door softly behind me. I looked in the silver mirror. The little Star of David glittered in a crooked ray of sun. Maybe Sister Therese Marie was right after all. I reached behind my neck and caught the clasp of the chain and snapped it open. It slid down my chest to the checkerboard floor. The shiny pointy star fell free. I picked it up and held it in the palm of my hand. Then I lifted the light blue lid of the toilet bowl. The water sparkled clear. And raising my hand up high, I let the golden six point star sail through the secret silent bathroom air to slice like silver through the waiting water. And then I flushed. It tumbled out of sight.

In the kitchen my grandmother was setting the table for supper. "What's taking you so long?" she called.

I let the sky blue lid back down and washed my hands. And then, coming into the summer evening kitchen I faced my grandmother: "I lost my Star of David," I said, most brightly.