

Annette LeBox

Fly Away Home

Roy Cinciella was sitting on his back porch sucking the few last breaths of oxygen from the tank beside his chair when he heard his neighbor's loud bullying shouts. They seared through the quiet morning like the raucous cry of a jay—always the same selfish tune—me! me! me!

Roy bristled when he heard him. The bastard. Then he caught himself, knew that if he ever had a fighting chance to ease up on himself, he'd have to give the same treatment to the other misfits of the world.

The wife's voice, a high-pitched trill, was like the linnet's that had sung outside his window this morning, and her children, two girls and a baby, sounded like robins as they chattered and quarrelled and played.

Roy had started watching birds when his lungs gave way. Sitting on his porch, in one spot, unable to move without exhausting himself, he found that time moved more slowly, and in its slowed motion, he began to tune into parts of the world he'd never noticed before. It was as if someone had peeled away a thick layer of skin, leaving him raw and vulnerable and *sighted*. Not only his eyes. His hearing too, because suddenly, he'd been alerted to the *presence* of things—their texture, their smells, their colors. The rose color of the linnets, for instance. That rose color was spirited, otherworldly. It had a voice, that color—a girl's voice that sang lullabies. And the way the day fell into night, the sky broken into layer upon layer, inhabited by the varying creatures of the air. The bottom layer taken up by the sparrows and chickadees and robins—the night hawks taking up the higher spaces for their aerial ballet, the strange whoosh of their freefalls and their eerie cries that announced the waning

light—and then higher, higher still, the crows flying homeward to their roosts near the river, ushering in the dark. That he'd never noticed this procession of crows—hundreds, maybe thousands of them—floating above the trees just before dusk seemed unbelievable.

Sometimes, this sightedness made him feel wise, but more often he felt foolish, for the waste of much of his life. And the irony was that the understanding of this, had come to him once he'd realized he was dying.

Her husband was yelling again—goddamn bitch, he screamed. Oh, if it were five years ago, he and Peter would have marched up those stairs and punched his lights out. Treating a woman like that, he couldn't stand the thought.

A while later, Roy heard a door slam and when he peered around the corner from the porch, he could see the burly form of the husband get into his pickup and roar off. Off to work. Good riddance. He wouldn't be back till seven or eight now. Roy was glad for her sake.

He drew in one more deep breath, then removed the small plastic tubing from his nose. He took the empty canister over to the oxygen machine in the corner of the porch and hooked it up. The sound of oxygen filling the tank was soothing. It sounded like life pouring in—his life.

While he waited he made himself a cup of coffee and read yesterday's newspaper. The coffee was good. It was a gourmet grind, one of the ways he'd learned to treat himself. When he finished the paper, he hooked up his oxygen again and stretched out his legs and had a nap.

He woke to footsteps.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Me," said a small voice. She was standing at the foot of the stairs looking up at him. It was one of the girls from next door, the oldest one, thin and rakish looking. She had egg caked around her mouth.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine. What's that?" she asked, pointing to this tank.

"My air. I need it to breathe."

"Oh. What are those?"

"Tattoos," he said, rolling up his sleeve. "See."

"They're pretty. I like the rose."

"The rose is my favorite too."

"I can read. It says 'Gail'."

"You're a good reader. What's your name?"

"Lila." She tugged at her hair, twisting it round with one finger. "My mummy won't come out. Jenny's crying and mummy won't come out."

"Is Jenny your baby sister?" he asked.

She nodded. "Mummy won't come out."

"Where is she now?" he asked.

"Hiding."

"Where's she hiding?"

"In the dark. She won't come out." Maybe her husband beat her up, Roy thought. Maybe he killed her; but then he thought, don't be crazy. This wasn't exactly the classiest neighborhood but it wasn't the Lower East Side. Things were different here.

"Are you scared?" he asked.

"Uh huh," she said.

"Do you want me to see if your mommy's alright?"

"Yeah," she said.

He stopped to consider whether he should take the oxygen with him or not. The tank embarrassed him. It made him feel weak and disabled. He didn't always need it, but if he should run into trouble, he'd be helpless without it. Swallow your pride, he told himself. He picked the tank up with one hand and took Lila's hand in the other and she led him across the lawn and up the back stairs. The screams of the baby were deafening. No wonder the little girl was upset.

She pointed to the bedroom. The bed was unmade and there were clothes on the floor, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

"Where's mommy?" he asked.

Lila pointed to the closet. "There."

He pushed the clothing aside and he saw the woman sitting in the far corner of the closet, her head on her knees.

"Are you alright?" he asked, peering in at her.

She looked up but she didn't answer. He could see that she'd been crying. The insistent wail of the baby in the background unnerved him.

"I'll be back," he said to her.

"Where's the baby, Lila?" he asked, holding his hand out to her and she took him to small bedroom across the hall. Two cribs and a single bed were crammed into the bedroom, which smelled of urine.

A little girl with tight blond curls—she looked about three—sat in one crib sucking her thumb, a baby in the other. The baby, her eyes red and watery, stopped screaming when she saw him, and put her arms towards Lila to pick her up.

"It's ookay," cooed Lila, lifting the baby into her arms. "It's ookay."

"What's wrong with her?" he asked.

"She's wet," Lila said. "I know how to change her."

He watched Lila take a disposable diaper from a package near the bed and diaper the baby as efficiently as any mother.

"How old are you?" he asked, in astonishment.

"Seven and a half, going on eight."

"You stay here and look after your sister. I'm going to talk to your mom."

When he returned to the bedroom, he asked the woman again if she was alright, but she still gave him no reply.

She was traumatized, that was obvious. He'd seen enough cons to know the signs. It was when someone gave up, that it hit them that way—the withdrawal, the catatonia. He was familiar with that. He'd been counselling druggies and alkiees for the past 10 years till he got too sick. He'd been successful, too, especially with the young guys. The tank helped—and his wretched appearance—the sunken face, the large hawk nose, the pale sickly looking skin. Those guys'd take one look at him, see him sucking wind like that, looking like he was going to keel over any minute and their eyes just about bugged out of their heads.

Heroin, that's what years of heroin looks like, boys, take a good look. You think you're too smart to get caught. That's what I thought too.

It was the talc that ruined his lungs. Some goddamn bastard trying to make a fast buck cutting horse with talc.

He unhooked his oxygen tank and placed it by the doorway. Then he slowly moved closer to where the woman was sitting. She recoiled from him, retreating farther into the corner of the closet. If he was going to help her, she had to talk, but if she wouldn't talk to him, he'd talk to her. It was one and the same. You had to get them talking. It was the connection that was important. The sharing. Even with a stranger. Sometimes the sharing was easier with a stranger.

"I'm not going to touch you," he said. "I promise. I live next door. Lila came and got me. She's a good girl. Really good for her age. I just want to talk to you. That's all. My name's Roy."

She still didn't answer. So he began to talk to her. If nothing else, the sound of his voice might soothe her—like Peter's telling him he was going to be okay.

Listen, Roy, don't you worry, nobody messes with the Cinciella brothers. You've got a problem with anyone, they gotta deal with me. The Cinciella brothers are one and the same. We gotta stick together, you and me. Together we could rule the world. We will someday. We already own this neighborhood. You don't ever have to worry, little brother. I'll take care of you. I promise. You hear that. I promise.

Roy pushed the clothes aside in the closet, so he could see her better.

"I've been afraid too," he said to her. "Just like you. Every minute of my life I've lived with fear. That's probably hard to imagine—a tough guy like me—tattoos everywhere, looking the way I do. Christ, I wouldn't want to meet myself in an alley." He laughed at his own joke. "But I'm not quite as afraid as I used to be. Not since Peter died. Peter was my brother. Died of an overdose of heroin. He died in a room at the Cambie. I got there too late. Too late to bring him back."

The woman started to cry then, but he knew it wasn't because of what he'd said; she was crying for herself—for whatever it was that she was suffering from.

"It's good to cry. You go right ahead."

He stayed with her for another hour or so while she cried, then he left her. He didn't know what else to do.

Later on that day, he went over to see if she was okay. When he knocked, she was making lunch for her little ones. The baby was quiet and she'd cleaned herself up and combed her hair. She looked pretty in a matronly kind of way, though he imagined she was only in her late twenties—maybe younger. She thanked him quietly and he went back home.

* * *

The night Roy called 911, he thought he was going to die. He couldn't get his breath. They sent an ambulance with sirens screaming to his place

and a couple of paramedics rushed up the stairs and examined him. She must have heard the sirens and had come running across the lawn. He saw her standing by the doorway when they worked on him.

"I thought you'd died," she said.

"I've got a while to go yet. So they tell me."

"He'll be okay," said one of the paramedics. "Can you keep an eye on him?"

"Sure," she replied. "I'll go check on the kids and if they're asleep, I'll come back and sit with you for a bit."

"Your old man . . .?" Roy asked.

"He's working nights this week, till Saturday. He won't be home till tomorrow morning."

"Wait, I don't know your name."

"Donna. I'll be back shortly."

An old rhyme he'd learned as a kid came to him.

Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home.

Your house is on fire, your children are gone.

When she returned she was wearing an oversized sweater. She went over to him and puffed up his pillows, pulled his quilt over him, and placed his oxygen tank on a chair beside his bed. Then she sat at the end of the bed, hugging her knees.

There was only one lamp on, the lamp beside his bed, and it gave off a golden glow. If he shut his eyes, he could easily imagine the whole world contained within this small golden shell. Just the two of them—him and her. He was nervous. When he got nervous, he talked. She was quiet, so it worked out well. His talking seemed to calm her.

She must have gotten tired of sitting up like that because a while later, she moved so she was lying beside him, on top of the quilt. In the old days he would have seen this as an invitation—her lying in bed with him like that—but he was smart enough to know that she didn't want him as a man because he was helpless. He could have felt badly about that but he chose not to—he chose to feel honored for the time she spent with him.

It felt good to talk to a woman. It had been a long time since he'd enjoyed feminine company. Gail had been his only real relationship and that hadn't lasted long. It had taken him two years to drive her away with the drinking and drugs and playing around. Gail was classy—a real

lady—and she'd loved him. He'd thrown it away. He'd had the gold right in the palm of his hand and he'd tossed it out the window, like it was nothing.

His breathing became labored again. Every precious breath of oxygen had to be earned, but if he gave up trying—even for a moment—he thought he was going to die. He wondered whether he was dying right now, right here, in this golden room? Would that be so terrible? At least, he wouldn't be alone. He started to wheeze then, to grasp the air too greedily.

It's fear, he told himself. Let it go. Stop hiding it.

Come on, Roy. Don't let them get you down. You got to beat it, little brother. I'm looking out for you, up here. I said I'd take care of you and I am. Just calm yourself. Nobody gets the best of the Cinciellas.

"Are you alright?" Donna asked.

He nodded, tears coming to his eyes.

"I keep thinking I'm going to die. But they say it's panic more than anything."

"Tell me about Peter," she said.

"Peter. Yes. My brother. We were inseparable. Everyone knew us. The Cinciella brothers. If you said Peter, that meant Roy, and Roy meant Peter. Peter was always there for me. He was the oldest. He took care of things. He promised me he'd always take care of me. And he did. I overdosed 21 times. Peter saved me all those times. He was always there for me, taking care of me, but I failed him. I got there too late. He was dead when I found him, lying on the floor of the room while I was out guzzling beer a couple of blocks away. I failed him. I let him down and now I'm alone. I get so angry with him for leaving me. Peter, why did you leave me all alone?" He was bawling like a baby now, sobbing like his heart would break and she lay her head on his shoulder for a moment. He could feel her breathing then, and he imagined she was breathing for him—and then that they were breathing together—and he thought, if he had to die soon, make it right now, in this moment.

But he wasn't dying, and after a bit, he wiped his eyes and calmed himself and felt embarrassed.

"Pretty wimpy for a tough guy, eh," he said, forcing a smile, but she didn't answer him.

She stayed beside him until he drifted off to sleep. He slept soundly until morning and when he woke he thought he might have dreamed the whole thing, except that one of the medics had left some paperwork on his dresser.

He didn't see her for a long time after that. Except for the odd time when he saw her hanging her washing on the line. Then he'd wave to her and she'd give him a perfunctory nod, but most of the time she barely acknowledged him.

* * *

Winter came and Roy hung on. He bought a couple of bird-feeders which he hung from the railing of his porch and he'd watch the winter birds peck the seeds. He picked up a pair of binoculars at a garage sale for five bucks. They were Bausch & Lomb, a real find. They were big and far too heavy, but they did the trick. The winter wrens came to the feeders and the chickadees and nuthatches. After a while the birds hardly noticed him sitting there on the porch. He hoped that one day they'd be so tame, they'd eat from his hand.

His main struggle was breathing—after that came eating, dressing, and walking but the hardest thing was knowing that the aches and pains, and the infections and heart palpitations would slowly multiply, and that things would never again be easy.

When the doorbell rang, Roy spotted Lila's small figure through the window. His heart beat faster. More often than not, she'd visit him when there was trouble at home.

"Mummy's hurt," she said.

"Your daddy hit her?" he asked.

The little girl nodded. "Right here," she said, pointing to her mouth and when she opened it, he saw her teeth were rotten. Poor kid. They'd been poor but his mamma always made sure they went to the dentist. His teeth were perfect. It was the only part of his body that was.

He picked up the oxygen tank and followed the child over to the house.

Donna was sitting in the living room. The TV was blaring and the second child, the toddler, was sitting on the carpet surrounded by toys. Donna was in her housecoat. She didn't acknowledge his presence.

"Donna?" he said, and when she turned towards him, he saw her mouth was swollen on one side and her cheek had a dark bruise on it. Her eyes were puffy from crying.

"Jesus," he whispered, kneeling in front of her. "Why don't you leave him? I'll help you."

Her bottom lip quivered. "I can't."

"What do you mean? I'll help you."

"I stay for them," she said, glancing at the children.

"This can't be good for them. Seeing you like this."

"If I leave him, he'll get the kids. He'll say I'm a bad mother."

"But you're not. I hear him screaming and yelling. Look at your face. I'll call the police."

"It won't do any good. He'll lie. He'll tell them all kinds of lies about me. He's done it before." She started crying then.

"Look, I'd bet anything you'd get custody, but at the worst—the very worst—you'd get joint custody. You have them for part of the week, then he would."

"No," she said adamantly, beating her fists on the coffee table. The tears were streaming down her face now. "Nooo."

"It would be better than this," he said. Why wouldn't she listen?

"No." Then she began beating her legs and her chest, crying and beating at herself in a frenzy of self-hatred.

"Take care of your sister, Lila. Take her into the other room. Quick, quick."

"It's not your fault," he said to her, grabbing her arms, trying to stop her. He felt her body go limp then, she began to cry uncontrollably.

"I can't let him have them. I have to guard them. My darlings. I have to keep him away. He's not going to get them. He's not. He's not." She spoke rapidly, as if she were on the run, as if she had to say the words quickly before she lost her courage.

Then she began crying again, crumbling before him. She looked like she was dying, but it was a spiritual death, the way she cried from deep inside her. He'd only heard that kind of anguish once or twice in his life.

"We'll keep him away from them. We'll go to the police. Together. You can tell them what he's done to you, what he's done to the kids. I'll help you." If Peter were here, they would beat up the asshole. The man was inhuman. Something reprehensible.

"No, it's no use. He's too crafty. He's the craftiest man alive. He'll say I'm crazy. He'll convince them it's me. Don't talk about it anymore. It's impossible." She covered her ears now as if to drown him out, as if to tell him she couldn't bear him to give her false hope. As if hope would kill her.

"Donna . . ."

"Don't mention it again," she screamed. "You hear me!"

"I won't," he said. "Unless you ask."

He stayed with her until the baby woke up and began crying and she began her motherly duties again. He watched her dry her eyes and pick herself up again and put on a happy face.

"I think we should have a picnic, this afternoon," she said as cheerfully as she could manage.

"Hurrah!" Lila said, and the toddler clapped.

"Can we have hotdogs?" Lila asked.

"Of course, and ice cream," said Donna.

He left her then, saying she could call him anytime, that he'd fit her into his busy schedule. She laughed when he said that, but he knew she wouldn't call. They both did.

* * *

Roy started watching the husband after that. His name was Stan. Stan. Stanley, he liked to call him. Stanley the bully. Stanley the wifebeater. Stanley the pervert. He knew what time the bastard left the house and when he got back. He'd watched him through the binoculars so often that he knew every wrinkle, every flaw. He had a mole on his left cheek, and a potbelly that hung over his belt a couple of inches and his hair was receding. Not like his. He still had thick coal black hair. Got that over you, bastard.

Sometimes the rage he felt overwhelmed him. The impotence too. He'd toyed with the idea of buying a gun. He knew lots of people. It wouldn't be hard. But he knew that was stupid. A murder wouldn't help those kids. In the old days he wouldn't have thought of that. He might have done it then.

Sometimes he dreamed of her. He knew it was useless, even if he'd been healthy—he was old and ugly to boot. But then he thought, she

didn't have to know. He could love her anyway. He liked to watch over her and the kids—to take care of them like he did the birds in the neighborhood. The poor creatures would've starved this winter if he hadn't fed them.

He was asleep the next time she came to see him, banging at the door and crying.

"Where's Stan?" he asked, wondering if she was running from him.

"Gone to the bar," she said. "To get drunk."

He led her to the living room and asked her to sit down.

"Did he hit you again?" he asked.

She kept crying, shaking her head and crying.

"No, he didn't hit me," she said.

"What's wrong, Donna?" he asked.

"He . . . he . . ."

"It's okay, tell me," he said.

"He said get that little rat outta my bed. His own child. He called his own child a rat," she sobbed.

She fell to her knees before him and hugged his legs as she cried. He didn't know what to say. Part of her loved that monster. Part of her couldn't face him not loving their child.

"It's gonna be alright, Donna. It's gonna be okay."

He felt his hopes slowly fading. His hopes of being the hero, of conquering the world, of making a difference. He should have known by now how impossible this was. But he kept hanging onto these last vestiges of pride.

He opened his hand a little and imagined it flying away—like a brilliant colored bird. Fly away home, he thought to himself. Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home.