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THE BIRD TREE

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THE BIRD TREE

The first summer of the '90s was a loser. Except for the tree.

In June I had appendicitis and surgery. Then came allergies-- penicillin in the hospital, sun rashes later. In July I broke my ankle. "Serial miseries," my husband, Rob, called it. Worse, there was our next door neighbor, Mr. Keeler-- calling to complain that our barbecue smelled like a paper mill, or putting notes in our mail box suggesting a lawn service to "green up our yard." Twice he knocked on our door late at night to say our TV was too loud--then conceded it was the people across the street. He strode off our porch muttering as he went over there. I saw his wife only once after I took them a cake when they moved here in January. She nodded to me in a department store, then busied herself with the wares. Ah well, I never was a great cook.

While the ankle mended I spent a lot of time staring out the window. To be rewarded by a dead tree. The only bright spot of the summer.

It was a wild cherry, no great asset when healthy. Unless you were waiting for a couple of Austrian pines to reach a

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height you could look up to. For years we pruned lifeless limbs off the cherry until it was utterly graceless. Each spring we planned to cut it, then a few leaves would appear and Rob would say, "Oh, honey, maybe it'll recover."

The greening grew less until there was none. But something else was happening. Birds loved the bare branches. And we loved the unobstructed view of their visits. So that's how our deciduous hat rack came to be known as the Bird Tree. How could I part with something that was getting me through that awful summer?

Unfortunately, Mr. Keeler told us not only how but when. "It's an eyesore and a disgrace," he said. "I insist you get rid of it immediately. We're having weekend guests."

"Oh, Mr. Keeler, tell them we collect avant-garde sculpture," Rob kidded after getting nowhere with the truth.

But Mr. Keeler didn't lighten up. His property edged an older, more expensive area. His spruces were 60 feet tall. Two days later he sent a tree surgeon over to discuss removing our "eyesore."

That night I telephoned him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Keeler, but we're not ready to take the tree down yet. I really enjoy watching the birds while I'm stuck indoors."

"I'll even pay for it, Mrs. Weston. Just call the man back."

"It's not the cost, Mr. Keeler. I hope to be well soon."

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Please be patient."

"I've been patient. There should be a law about ruining someone else's view," he growled.

"The only place you can see it is from your guest room, for heaven's sake! By the time your friends use it, it'll be dark. Just close the blinds." I said good-bye politely.

The Keelers' company came and went. I had to spend the next week mostly in bed when my ankle swelled again. I watched goldfinches rollercoastering the side yard, then balancing on a thistle seed feeder in the tree. Purple finch acrobatics entertained me until noon when I could almost set my watch by the arrival of the black-capped chickadees. Red wing blackbirds, cardinals and downy woodpeckers came, too.

Early Sunday evening, I dozed after two achey, sleepless nights. I woke to a strange sound. A series of sounds, almost under my other window. Deep, up-from-the-ground noises only a hound can make. Squinting through the shadows, I could see a large head moving in rhythm with each outburst. Wind shifted the shrubbery and the light picked up a chain leading to Mr. Keeler's spruce. The animal was straining at the end of its leash within inches of our property line. It was amazing how often the dog could bark without stopping to inhale.

Rob came in. "I'm sorry, honey. I called over there but no one's home. I'm going out and see if I can quiet it."

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It went on for almost a month. Day and night. The birds disappeared the first week. Finally, nervously, they returned to their routines. We wondered how the dog's throat could survive a voice of such rough substance. Rob confronted Mr. Keeler and confirmed what we already figured: He'd get rid of the dog when we got rid of the tree. We even offered to buy the dog. "If it were for sale, you couldn't afford it," Keeler said imperiously.

Twice we called the police when it was really awful at night. Other neighbors did, too. The squad car would arrive and stay a few minutes. Once, Mrs. Keeler came out and put the dog in the garage until the officers left. The last time, no one answered when they knocked, and after dropping by to tell us they were sorry, they drove away. We had heard that Keeler had friends on the force and in city government. Everyone who called the Keelers was told that if they wanted peace they should pressure us to cut down the offending tree. One or two did try, but Keeler's tactics were so disgusting, most people sympathized with us and bought dual headphones for their cassettes.

Since the Keelers were rarely at home, Rob began making friends with the dog and teaching it to mind him. At first, it growled and backed off. When it finally accepted Rob's touch, he found a raw sore under its collar and welts on its flanks. Rob came in for some salve and said, "I think Keeler

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"Can't we report him for mistreating the poor thing?"

"What good would it do? He'd just say he's training the dog. We already know he's got influence downtown."

Aided by canine biscuits and leftovers, Rob had some success at getting "Beast," as we called him, to hush on command. One night he took some steak over to feed him. Suddenly I heard the back door slam, Rob's feet racing across the kitchen, then the telephone being dialed. When I got to the kitchen, Rob was hanging up. "Looks like somebody poisoned Beast," he said. "I got him out of that trick harness and put him in the car. Just called the vet and he's gonna open up for me. Be back as soon as I can."

An hour later Rob called from the vet's. "It's bad. The doc doesn't know if he can save him. I'll be home shortly. Nothing more I can do."

Before he got back, the Keelers' car pulled into their garage. Angrily, I picked up the telephone. "Mr. Keeler, this is Mrs. Weston. I just want to tell you that your dog may have been poisoned and my hus--"

His voice boomed into mine. "Well now, I wondered how long it would be before you resorted to that. Guess I'll just have to call the police myself this time, won't I?"

I got my wits together enough to say, "Mr. Keeler, my husband found your dog sick and took him to the vet. No

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matter how we feel about you, we wouldn't harm any animal!"

Rob walked in as I spoke. He reached for the phone. "I just left the clinic, Keeler. It looks like your dog may make it. But from what I just heard my wife say, you must have made an awfully reckless remark!"

"The dog's still alive?" I could hear him easily. Rob backed the phone from his ear.

"Call Dr. Anderson at Lakeside and talk to him yourself." Rob hung up.

He was furious when I related the whole conversation. He wanted to go over there. But we both calmed down. Even with Rob's efforts to save it, we were both prime suspects if the dog died. Keeler may have hoped for that all along.

The vet called Friday, as Rob asked, to report on Beast. He was upset. "I've been dealing with pet owners for 20 years," he said, "but I've never run into anything like this. I'm sure the basset is pure blooded. But that man wants it put to sleep even though it's going to be fine."

I shouldn't have been surprised at anything where Keeler was concerned. But there was more.

"I just can't put the animal down, Mrs. Weston. This Keeler guy refuses to pay the bill. He says he didn't authorize treatment and that I should bill you folks. I'm just going to keep the dog in lieu of payment. Can you beat that character?"

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"A wonder someone hasn't. Do you plan to sell the dog?"

"I guess I should. I've got three at home and my kennels are full. I'll find someone who'll be good to him. He's young-- with a little training he'll make a nice pet."

I heard myself stutter, stop and start again. The vet must not have been very sure of me, either. He said, "What?"

"Will you sell him to us? I'll keep him in the house most of the time. He can romp on the other side of our yard. It's fenced where we used to have tomatoes."

"You'd be asking for trouble. Your neighbor is a nut."

"He may never know we have the dog. He's led such a miserable life--the basset, that is--I'd like to make it up to him."

The vet sold us Beast for only the amount of his bill. I needn't have worried what Rob would say. The first thing we did was name him Bill. In one of his snide gestures, Keeler had shown Rob the dog's papers when he was over there complaining. "You should be happy you're being kept awake by the very best," he quipped. Rob didn't look at the papers and had no idea what name he was registered under.

Bill already loved Rob for the food and attention he'd provided. We'd long suspected the dog went for days with nothing else to eat. Rob poured dead bugs and leaves out of his water dish and the basset would rub his big head against Rob's shin like a cat.

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I felt good by October. Bill was part of the reason. Sitting beside me on the couch while I read, he made small sounds in his throat when birds lit in our tree but he never barked. Bracket fungus began ruffling the tree trunk. Birds flocked to the suet balls and orange slices we hung. In the first snow, our eyesore looked like an Oriental tree decorated with origami.

There was no sign of life next door. We heard the Keelers were in Florida. One night when spring seemed imminent, Rob said, "I guess it's time to think about cutting down the Bird Tree. It's starting to dry rot. A storm could crash it into the window."

Next morning there was a robin in it with moss in its beak. I mentioned it when Rob called from work.

"I'd better rent a chain saw and--"

"Maybe we could brace it for a little longer--"

"Honey, we don't want to wait till there's a nest and eggs. I'll take off this afternoon and get it over with."

He was right, of course. Soon there was a rudimentary nest on one of the stobs. The bark sloughed off and it fell. "You must be a beginner robin," I quipped aloud. "That's really shiftless work." Bill wagged all over as if I'd told him his dinner was ready.

When Rob got home, a new nest was well underway. "I've never seen one being built from scratch," he said, watching

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the bird tuck in dried grass. "Well--anywhere it goes will be better protected than that." He gave me a little lop-sided grin and went out the back door.

The chain saw sputtered a few times then began a steady, high-pitched hum. I almost didn't hear the telephone.

"Please stop him!" a hoarse voice said breathlessly.
"Don't let him cut it!"

"What? I--"

"Don't let him cut the tree-- oh--he's--"

"Wh--hello-- Hello?"

The caller was gone. I went out to Rob. Mrs. Keeler was running toward him yelling, "Stop! Stop!"

Rob stopped the motor and climbed down the ladder telling her to move from under the big branch he'd started sawing.

"Please!" she cried. "Don't cut it down. You'll never know how much it's meant to Henry all winter. It's the only thing--" Her face contorted and she began to cry. She seemed about to fall. We reached for her and led her inside.

We were calming her when I remembered the phone. "That must have been your husband who called. He sounded ill--"

"He is. He doesn't have long to live," she said softly.
"We'd better check on him, Rob. He just quit talking mid-sentence!"

All three of us raised Mr. Keeler. He was in bed, folded over the telephone on his lap. His lids flickered as we

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propped him against the pillows. In a few minutes he turned toward the window. "It's still there," he said weakly, almost smiling. "I was afraid--"

"Don't try to talk yet, Henry. I'll explain things to them. You can talk to them later." She nodded to us and we followed her to the den.

She was in control now. She insisted on making coffee. We sat down.

"Henry's dying of cancer," she said presently. "He's been where you saw him since February. He's not helpless yet but he has these spells." She filled our cups. She looked at Rob then at me. "I've--wanted to apologize to you both so many times but he wouldn't let me. Then when he got so-- We talked about it one night and he admitted he'd been a rotter. But he has this awful pride. He's also had awful pain. Your tree with all the birds has been such a blessing to him. I can't tell you how many hours he's watched them through the blinds."

It must have been terrible for her. I didn't know what to say. Her cup and saucer made a tiny china sound in the silence.

She looked back at me. "The irony of it all isn't wasted on him. He wants to apologize now but he doesn't know how."

"We thought you were gone all this time," I said. "We'd have helped you-- run errands-- sat with him so you could get

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out--"

She stared a moment. "I believe you would." She looked down. "Thank you. I've managed so far but I really appreciate that. I have everything delivered. He doesn't want me to leave." She looked at her lap a long time. "He really is so very sorry for what he did-- to you and that poor dog. He had it put to sleep. He didn't want to be bothered with it when he realized it wasn't going to make you give in. Now he has nightmares about it. One night he woke up sobbing."

"Well," I smiled at Rob, "I think we can provide some relief on that count."

She looked up questioningly. Rob told her.

"You-- you have him? Where? Where do you keep him?"

"He's a house dog now. And his run is on the other side of our lower level. Do you think Mr. Keeler would like to see him?"

"Oh, I'm sure he would! Just knowing the dog is alive will mean so much! Let me look in on him. Could you bring the dog over now if he feels like it?"

We agreed. After she left the room I wondered aloud how Bill would react. "What if he growls or something?"

"I don't think he'll do anything. I'll carry him, let Mr. Keeler pat him, then take him home. He'll be okay."

Bill had just been groomed and the rich browns of his coat

gleamed against the white. His expression was one of meditative dignity. When Rob appeared in Mr. Keeler's doorway with his elongated burden, his arms overhung with ears, tail and a stray leg, the man in bed broke into a gaunt grin. I couldn't recall ever seeing him smile before.

Bill's big eyes rolled up at Rob then over to me. His ears twitched but there were no whistles or whines. Mr. Keeler asked if he could rub his head and Rob bent down, aiming Bill. Mr. Keeler used one tentative finger. Suddenly he raised up, took Bill's thick head and neck between his hands, bent his forehead to Bill's and began to weep.

It was a painful scene. Mrs. Keeler was crying, too. But Bill took charge. Out came his long tongue, and ever so gently he licked Mr. Keeler's chin and wrists.

"You're probably the luckiest mutt in the world to have such wonderful folks," his former owner said finally. They maintained eye contact for some moments without Bill turning away. "If you'll ask them to forgive me for being such an old reprobate, it might help."

Bill's tongue came out again, this time in a half pant that curled his lip like a grin, seconded by a hearty wag.

"Atta boy, Bill. Tell him all's forgotten," said Rob. "Now let's go for a ride. Gotta take back the chain saw I rented. That tree's more solid than I thought." □

THE BIRD TREE

There are no reminders of the summer of '88 among my souveniers. Mostly I try to forget there was such a time. Except for the tree.

In June I had appendicitis and surgery. For weeks I had allergies beginning with penicillin in the hospital. In July I broke my ankle. "Serial miseries," my husband Rob called it. On top of it all there was our next door neighbor, Mr. Keeler-- calling to complain that our barbecue smoke smelled like burning trash and was blowing his way, or putting notes in our mail box suggesting we hire a lawn service to "green up our yard." Twice he knocked on our door late at night to say our TV was too loud--then conceded that it must be the people across the street. He strode off our porch muttering as he went over there. I never saw his wife but once after I took over a cake when they moved in. She nodded to me in a department store then busied herself with the wares, looking rather embarrassed.

My doctor ordered me off my feet several times in August. I did a lot of reading. But my eyes always snapped back to

the window--to be rewarded by a dead tree-- the only bright spot of the summer.

It was a wild cherry, no great asset when it was healthy. Unless you were waiting for for a couple of Austrian pines to reach a height you could look up to. The cherry began dying three seasons before. We pruned lifeless limbs until it was utterly graceless. Each year we planned to cut it, then a few leaves would appear and Rob would say, "Oh, honey, maybe it'll recover."

The greening grew less until there was none. But something else was happening. Birds loved the bare branches. And we loved the unobstructed view of their visits. Birds were invisible when they lit in the fat pines. So that's how this deciduous coat rack came to be known as the Bird Tree. How could I part with something that was getting me through that awful summer?

Unfortunately, Mr. Keeler told us not only how but when. "It's an eyesore and a disgrace," he said. "I insist you get rid of it before this weekend. We're having guests."

"Oh, Mr. Keeler, tell them we collect avant-garde sculpture," Rob kidded after getting nowhere with the real reason.

"But Mr. Keeler didn't lighten up. His property edged an older, more expensive area. His spruces were 60 feet tall.

Two days later he sent a tree surgeon over to discuss removing our "eyesore."

That night I telephoned him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Keeler, but we're not ready to take the tree down. I really enjoy watching the birds it attracts while I'm stuck indoors."

"I'll even pay for it, Mrs. Weston, if you'll call the man back."

"It's not the cost, Mr. Keeler. But Rob plans to do it himself when we decide to get rid of it. I hope to be well soon. Please be patient."

"I've been patient. There should be a law about ruining someone else's view," he growled.

"The only place you can see it is from your guest room, for heaven's sake! By the time your guests use it, it'll be dark. Just shut the blinds." I said good-bye politely.

The Keelers' company came and went. I was given some new medication that made my allergies worse and had to spend the next week mostly in bed when my ankle swelled again. When Rob got home from work, he'd join me at the window. Every evening the finches came, rollercoastering the side yard then lighting on a pail of thistle seed hanging in the tree. During the early morning, their acrobatics and squabbles entertained me for hours. At noon, I could almost set my

watch by the arrival of the black-capped chickadees. Red wing blackbirds, cardinals and downy woodpeckers came, too.

On Sunday, I went to sleep before dark after two sleepless nights. I woke suddenly to a strange sound. For a moment, I didn't know what it was. Then there was another series-- loud unmistakable barks. Almost under my window. Deep, up-from-the-ground noises only a hound can make. Squinting through the shadows, I could see a large head moving in rhythm with each outburst. Wind shifted the shrubbery shadows and the light picked up a chain leading to Mr. Keeler's spruce. The animal was straining at the end of its leash within inches of our property line. It was amazing how often the dog could bark without stopping to inhale.

"Rob came in. "I'm sorry, honey. I called over there but no one's home. I'm going out and see if I can quiet him."

It went on for almost a month. Day and night. The birds seldom lit the first week. Finally they returned to their routines but nervously. We wondered how the dog's throat could survive a bark of such rough substance. Rob confronted Mr. Keeler and confirmed what we already knew: He'd get rid of the dog when we got rid of the tree. We even offered to buy the dog. "If it were for sale, you couldn't afford it," Keeler said imperiously.

Twice we called the police when it was really awful late

at night. Many other neighbors did the same. The squad car would arrive and stay a few minutes. Once, Mrs. Keeler came out and put the dog in the garage until the officers left. The last time, no one answered when they knocked, and after dropping by to tell us they were sorry, they drove away. We had heard that Keeler had cloutish friends on the force and in city government. Everyone who called the Keelers was told that if they wanted peace they should pressure us to cut down the offending tree. One or two did try but Keeler's tactics were so stinky, most people sympathized with us and bought dual headphones for their cassettes.

Since the Keelers were rarely at home, Rob began making friends with the dog and teaching it to mind him. At first, he growled and backed off at Rob's approach. When he finally let Rob touch him, he found a raw sore under his collar and welts on his flanks. Rob came in for some salve and said, "I think Keeler whips him."

"Can't we report him for mistreating the poor thing?"

"What good would it do?" He'd just say he's training the dog. We already know he's got influence downtown."

Aided by canine biscuits and leftovers, Rob had some success at getting "Beast" as we called him, to hush on command. One night he took some steak over to feed him. Suddenly I heard the back door slam, Rob's feet racing

across the kitchen, then the telephone being dialed. When I got to the kitchen, Rob was hanging up. "Looks like somebody poisoned Beast," he said. "I got him out of that trick harness and put him in the car. Just called the vet and he's gonna open up for me. Be back as soon as I can."

An hour later Rob called from the vet's. "It's bad. The doc doesn't know if he can save him but there's a chance. I'll be home shortly. Nothing more I can do."

Before he got back, the Keeler's car pulled into their garage. Angrily, I picked up the telephone. "Mr. Keeler, this is Mrs. Weston. I just want to tell you that someone poinsoned your dog and my hus--"

His voice boomed into mine. "Well now, I wondered how long it would be before you resorted to that. Guess I'll just have to call the police myself this time, won't I?"

I got my wits together enough to say, "Mr. Keeler, my husband found your dog sick and took him to the vet. No matter how we feel about you, we wouldn't harm an innocent animal!"

Rob walked in as I spoke. He reached for the phone. "I just left the clinic, Keeler. It looks like your dog may make it. But from what I just heard my wife say, you must have made an awfully reckless remark!"

"The dog's still alive?" I could hear him easily. Rob

backed the phone from his ear.

"Call Dr. Anderson at Lakeside and talk to him yourself."

Rob hung up.

He was furious when I related the whole conversation. He wanted to go over there. But we both calmed down. Even with Rob's efforts to save it, we were both prime suspects if the dog died. Keeler may have been baiting us from the beginning or maybe this just occurred to him.

On Friday, the vet called as Rob asked, to report on Beast. He was upset. "I've been dealing with pet owners for 20 years," he said, "but I've never run into anything like this. That man wants his dog put to sleep even though it's going to be perfectly okay."

By then I shouldn't have been surprised at anything where Keeler was concerned. But there was more.

"I just can't put the animal down, Mrs. Weston. But this Keeler guy refuses to pay the bill. He says he didn't authorize treatment and that I should bill you folks. Of course, I won't. I'm just going to keep the basset in lieu of payment. Can you beat that character?"

"Oh, I'd like to. Are you going to sell the dog?"

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pet. I'm sure he's got good blood."

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"You may be asking for trouble. That neighbor of yours is a nut."

"He may never know we have the dog. He's led such a miserable life--the basset, that is--I'd like to make it up to him."

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I felt good by October. Bill was part of the reason.

Sitting beside me on the chaise while I read, he made small sounds in his throat when birds lit in our tree but he never barked. All was peaceful. Bracket fungus began ruffling the tree trunk. By winter, it looked like any other hardwood except for its shape. Birds flocked to the suet balls and orange slices we hung. It looked like an Oriental tree decorated with origami.

There hadn't been a sign of life next door for weeks. We assumed the Keelers were out of town again, maybe visiting their daughter up north.

An early spring seemed imminent. One night Rob said, "I've been thinking about the tree. I guess we ought to take it down soon. The limbs are starting to dry rot. A storm could crash it into the window."

Next morning there was a robin in the Bird Tree with moss in its beak. I peeped from behind my patio draperies. Sure enough, it flew to my potted plants and swiped another piece of moss. I called Rob.

"I'd better rent a chain saw and cut it this afternoon."

"But we could brace it--"

"Honey, we don't want to wait till the nest is built and eggs are laid. I'll take off this afternoon and get it over with."

He was right, of course. The bird made a few false

starts, found another branch and began again. By noon there was a rudimentary base in a crotch where the bark was sloughing off. If the loose flap tore away in the wind, the whole thing was likely to fall. The robin started bringing twigs and stalks of blond grass, nudging them into the pile of moss. "You must be a beginner," I said aloud. "That's the most shiftless looking thing I ever saw." Bill wagged all over as if I'd told him his dinner was ready.

When Rob got home the nest was looking better. "I've never seen a nest built from scratch before," he said.

"Neither have I. I didn't finish the laundry for watching."

"Well--anywhere the bird goes will be better protected than that." He gave me a lop-sided smile and went out the back door.

The chain saw sputtered a few times then began a steady, high-pitched hum. I almost didn't hear the telephone.

"Please stop him!" a hoarse male voice said breathlessly.
"Don't let him cut it!"

"What? I--"

"Don't let him cut the tree-- oh--he's--"

"Wh--hello-- Hello?"

Obviously the party was gone. I went out to Rob. Mrs. Keeler was running toward him yelling, "Stop! Stop!"

Rob cut the motor and climbed down the ladder telling her to move from under the big branch he'd started sawing.

"Please!" she cried. "Don't cut it down. You'll never know how much it's meant to Henry all winter. It's the only thing--" Her face contorted and she began to cry. She seemed about to fall when we reached for her and led her into the kitchen.

We were calming her when I remembered the phone. "That must have been your husband who called. He sounded ill--"

"He is. He doesn't have long to live," she said softly.

"We'd better check on him, Rob. He just quit talking mid-sentence."

All three of us raised Mr. Keeler. He was in bed, folded over the telephone on his legs. His lids flickered as we propped him against the pillows. His wife brought an ice pack for his forehead. Moments later she brought water and pills which he took obediently. In a few minutes he sat up and turned toward the window. "It's still there," he said weakly, almost smiling. "I was afraid--"

"Don't try to talk yet, Henry." His wife adjusted the ice bag. "I'll explain things to them. You can talk to them later." She nodded to us and we followed her to the rec room.

She was in control now. We sat down while she made drinks

at a carved mahogany built-in bar that wasn't there when our old friends used to entertain us.

"Henry is dying of cancer," she said presently. "He's been where you saw him since February. He's not helpless yet but he has these spells." She served our drinks and sat down tiredly. She looked at Rob then at me. "I've--wanted to apologize to you both so many times but he wouldn't let me. Then when he got so-- We talked about it one night and he admitted he'd been a rotter. But he has this terrible pride. He's also had terrible pain. Your tree with all the birds has been such a blessing to him. I can't tell you how many hours he's watched them through the blinds."

It must have been awful for her. I didn't know what to say. Rob's ice tinkled slightly in the silence.

She looked back at me. "The irony of it all isn't wasted on him. He wants to apologize himself but he doesn't know how."

"We thought you were gone all this time," I said. "We'd have helped you-- run errands--sat with him so you could get out--"

She stared a moment. "I believe you would. Thank you. I've managed so far but I really appreciate that. I've had everything delivered. He doesn't want me to leave." She looked at her lap a long time. "He really is so very sorry

for what he did-- to you and that poor dog. He had it put to sleep. He didn't want to bother with it when he realized it wasn't going to make you give in. Now he has nightmares about it. One night he woke up sobbing."

"Well," I smiled at Rob, "I think we can provide some relief in that matter."

She looked up questioningly as Rob told her.

"You-- you have him? Where? Where do you keep him?"

"He's a house dog now. And his run is on the other side of our lower level. Do you think Mr. Keeler would like to see him?"

"Oh, I'm sure he would! Just knowing the dog is alive will mean so much! Let me look in on him. Could you bring the dog over now if he feels like it?"

We agreed. After she left the room I wondered aloud how Bill would react. "What if he growls or something?"

"I don't think he'll do anything. I'll carry him, let Mr. Keeler pat him, then take him home. He'll be okay."

Bill had just been groomed and the rich browns of his coat gleamed against the white. His expression was one of meditative dignity. When Rob appeared at Mr. Keeler's doorway with his elongated burden, his arms overhung with ears, tail and a stray leg, the man in bed broke into a

gaunt grin. I couldn't recall ever seeing him smile before. It must have been his best feature when he was well.

Bill's great eyes rolled up at Rob then over to me. His ears twitched but there were no whistles or whines. Mr. Keeler asked if he could rub his head and Rob bent down, aiming Bill. Mr. Keeler used one tentative finger. Suddenly he raised up, took Bill's thick head and neck between his hands, bent his forehead to Bill's and began to weep.

It was a painful scene. I looked away. Mrs. Keeler was crying, too. But Bill took charge. Out came his long tongue and ever so gently he licked both of Mr. Keeler's wrists.

"You're probably the luckiest mutt in the world to have such wonderful folks," his former owner said finally. They maintained eye contact for some moments without Bill turning away. "If you'll ask them to forgive me for being such an old reprobate, it might help them do it."

The tongue came out again, this time in a half pant that always curled his lip like a clown's chuckle seconded by a hearty wag.

"Atta boy, Bill. Tell him it's all forgotten," said Rob. "Now we'll go for a ride. We've gotta take back a chain saw I rented."

Our Family

Canada's Catholic Family Monthly Magazine

P.O. Box 249
Battleford, SK
Canada S0M 0E0

306/937-7772

October 21, 1986

Glenna Holloway
913 E. Bailey Road
NAPERVILLE, IL 60565
U.S.A.

Dear Glenna Holloway:

Thank you for letting us read your rewrite of The bird tree. You have all the elements of a good story here, but I think you are using too many words to tell it. Because of its length the story seems to drag. If you could cut it down by at least a third, I think you would add impact and intensity to your story. In brief, I think it is too fat; it lumbers. Trim away every redundant word and you will have a better story.

Thank you and God bless.

Sincerely,

Fr. Albert Lalonde, o.m.i.
Fr. Albert Lalonde, o.m.i.
Editor

/mak

Our Family

Canada's Catholic Family Monthly Magazine

P.O. Box 249
Battleford, SK
Canada S0M 0E0

X3X6X9X7X8X9XIX
(306) 937-7772

September 3, 1986

Glenna Holloway
913 E. Bailey Road
NAPERVILLE, IL 60565
U.S.A.

Dear Glenna Holloway:

Thank you for letting us read your story, The Bird Tree. Our fiction editor asked me to make the final decision on your story. We are interested in it. However, for our readership, we would like to see some changes. This is what I suggest:

- 1) I think it would be very advantageous to establish at the outset that there is something not quite right with Mr. Keeler. For example, you could mention the summer of '85 as something you would like to forget because there was this allergy, that allergy, the miscarriage, depression "and then there was Mr. Keeler." You can give some indication of the disequilibrium in his life by having him make rather harsh and not quite reasonable demands on his neighbors -- to the puzzlement of his neighbors and the embarrassment of his wife. If you do that, you are warning your readers that Mr. Keeler is really "not himself." That will prepare them to believe that he has been suffering already for a long time and by the end of the article he has terminal cancer.
- 2) Neglect of the dog by Mr. Keeler and Bill's care for it could be given a little more prominence.

As a note of interest, there does seem to be a connection between certain kinds of cancer and unforgiveness.

Thank you and God bless.

Sincerely,

Fr. Albert Lalonde, o.m.i.
Editor

/mak

3,880 originally
probably 3,500 now

Returned reunit
Dept. 18 —

THE BIRD TREE

Glenna Holloway

There are no reminders of the summer of '85 among my keepsakes. Mostly I try to forget there ever was such a time. Except for the tree.

In June I developed a roster of allergies aggravated by the heat wave. In July I had a miscarriage. During the aftermath of depression I caught flu, and from then on, lavishly entertained every cold bug within 50 miles. "Serial miseries", my husband, Rob called it. On top of everything else there was our next-door neighbor, Mr. Keeler-- calling often to complain that our ~~smoke~~ barbecue smoke was blowing his way and smelled like burning rubber, or putting notes in ours and other neighbors' mail boxes saying we should "fertilize and green up" our yards. A couple of times he knocked on our door late at night to say that our TV was too loud-- then conceded that it must be the people across the street. He strode off our porch, muttering as he crossed the road. I never saw his wife but once. She nodded a small "hello" in a department store then busied herself with hosiery, looking rather embarrassed.

My doctor ordered me to bed twice. Fuming, sometimes crying, I'd try to read. But my eyes always snapped back to the window--

to be rewarded by a dead tree-- the only bright spot of the summer.

It was a wild cherry, no great asset when it was healthy-- unless you were waiting for a couple of Austrian pines to reach a point you could look up to. The cherry began dying 3 seasons before. We pruned lifeless limbs until it was utterly graceless. Each year we planned to cut it, then a few leaves would appear and Rob would say, "Oh, Jen, it might recover. I hate to--"

But the greening grew less each spring until there was none. Meantime, something else was happening. Birds loved it. Apparently the bare branches appealed to them. And we loved the unobstructed view of their visits. When they lit in our fat pines, they disappeared in needles and shadows. So that's how this deciduous coat rack became known as the Bird Tree. I couldn't part with something that was getting me through that awful summer. And how could my husband chopt down the raison d'etre of his first in-focus portrait of a male downy wood-pecker doing its thing?

Unfortunately, Mr. Keeler told us not only how but when. "It's an eyesore and a disgrace," he said. "Makes the whole block look like Tobacco Road. I insist you get rid of it before this weekend. We're having out-of-town guests."

"Oh, Mr. Keeler, tell them we collect avant-garde sculpture," Rob kidded after getting nowhere with the real reason.

But Mr. Keeler didn't lighten up. His property edged an older, more expensive area. His spruces were 40 feet tall and he could afford to be picky. Two days later, he sent a tree surgeon over

to discuss removing our "eyesore".

That night I telephoned. "I'm sorry, Mr Keeler, but we aren't ready to take the tree down. It's beside my bedroom window and I really enjoy watching the birds while I'm stuck indoors. The tree seems to attract them."

"I'll pay for it myself, Mrs. Weston, if you'll call the man back!"

"It's not the cost, Mr. Keeler. The price he quoted was very reasonable. When we decide to do it we may use him. But not yet. I hope to be well soon. Please be patient."

"I've been patient! There should be a law about ruining someone else's view," he growled.

"The only place you can see it is from your guest room, for heaven's sake! By the time your guests use the room it will be dark. Just shut the blinds." I was getting upset, something I vowed wasn't going to happen. I said goodbye politely before things got worse. How come we got such a nerdy neighbor!

The Keelers' company came and went without incident. I was given some new medication that made my allergies worse and had to spend the next week in bed. When Rob got home from work he'd join me at the window. We reveled in the visits of goldfinches and cardinals. Every evening, the finches came, buzzing the side yard like yellow bullets then lighting on a little pail of thistle seed Rob hung in the tree. During the mornings, their squabbles and acrobatics entertained me for hours. Around noon, black-capped chickadees came. I could almost set my watch by them. The finches swooped off in their

roller coaster flight until suppertime. Afternoons brought red wing blackbirds, sparrows and sometimes the downies.

I went to sleep shortly after dark Sunday, after 2 sleepless nights. I woke suddenly to a strange sound. For a moment I didn't know what it was. Then there was another series-- loud unmistakable barks. Almost under my window. Deep, up-from-the-ground noises only a hound can make. Squinting through the shadows, I could see a large head moving in rhythm with each outburst. Wind shifted the shrubbery shadows and the light picked out a chain leading to Mr. Keeler's spruce. The animal was straining at the end of its leash within inches of our property line. It was amazing how often the dog could bark without stopping to inhale.

Rob came in. "I'm sorry, honey. I called over there but no one's home. I'm going out to see if I can get it quiet."

It went on for almost a month, day and night. The birds seldom lit the first week. Finally they returned to their old routines but nervously. We wondered how the dog's throat could survive a bark of such rough substance, seemingly able to shred anything it passed over. It certainly did that to our nerves whenever we removed our cassette earphones. Rob confronted Mr. Keeler and confirmed what we already knew: He'd get rid of the dog when we got rid of the tree. We even offered to buy the dog. It was not for sale. "But if it were, you couldn't afford it," Keeler said imperiously.

Twice we called the police when it was really awful, late at night. We discovered many other neighbors were doing the

same. The squad car would arrive and stay only a few minutes. Once, Mrs. Keeler came out and put the dog in the garage until it left. The last time, no one answered when the officers knocked and after dropping by to tell us they were sorry, they drove away. Later we learned that Keeler had cloutish friends on the force and in city government. Everyone who called the Keelers was told that if they wanted peace they should pressure us to cut down our offending tree. One or two did try but Keeler's tactics were so stinky, most people sympathized with us. Which is not to say they became more tolerant of the basset.

Since the Keelers were rarely at home, Rob had some success making friends with the dog and teaching it to mind him. At first he growled and backed off at Rob's approach. When he finally let Rob touch him, he found a raw sore under the animal's collar and welts on his flanks. Rob came in for some salve and said, "I think Keeler whips him." His face was full of pity.

"For what? Does he think he doesn't bark enough? Can't we report him for mistreating the poor thing?"

"What good would it do? He'd just say he's training the dog. We already know he's got influence downtown."

Aided by canine biscuits and choice leftovers, Rob was beginning to get "Beast" as we called him, to hush on command. One night he took a bite of steak over to feed him. Suddenly I heard the back door slam, Rob's feet race across the kitchen floor, then the telephone being dialed. When I got to the kitchen, Rob was hanging up. "Looks like somebody poisoned Beast," he said. "I got him out of that trick harness and put

He was furious when I related the entire conversation. He wanted to go over there. But we both calmed down. Even with Rob's efforts to save it, we were certainly prime suspects if the animal died. Keeler may have been baiting us from the beginning or this aspect may have occurred to him later. We decided to stay cool.

On Friday, the vet called as we had asked, to report on Beast. "I've been dealing with pet owners for 20 years," he said, "but I've never run into anything like this. That man wants his dog put to sleep even though it's going to be perfectly OK."

By then I shouldn't have been surprised at anything where Keeler was concerned. But there was more.

"I just can't put the animal down, Mrs. Weston. Also, this Keeler guy refuses to pay the bill since he didn't authorize treatment. Told me to charge you folks. Of course I won't. Instead, I'm going to keep the basset in lieu of payment. Can you beat that character?"

"Oh, I'd like to. Are you going to sell the dog?"

"I guess that's the thing to do. My kennels are pretty full and I've got 3 afghans at home already. I'll find a buyer who will be good to him. He's not full grown yet. With a little training he'll make a nice pet. I'm sure he's got good blood. I can probably track down the breeder."

I heard myself stutter, stop and start again. The vet must

not have been sure of what I said, either, but in answer to his WHAT? there was no mistaking what I repeated.

"Will you sell him to us? I'll keep him in the house most of the time. And he can romp on the other side of the back yard. It's already fenced where we used to have a garden."

"You might be asking for trouble. That neighbor of yours is a nut."

"Yes. But he may never know we have the dog. He's led such a miserable life-- the basset, that is, I'd like to make it up to him."

In the end, he relented and sold us Beast, only asking the amount of the bill. I needn't have worried what Rob would say.

The first thing we did was name him Bill. He'd never had a name to be called by before. In one of his snide gestures, Keeler had shown Rob the dog's papers when he was over there complaining. "You should be pleased to know you're being kept awake by the very best," he quipped. Rob only glanced at them and had no idea what name he was registered under.

Bill already loved Rob for the attention and food he'd provided. We'd long suspected the animal went for days with nothing else to eat. Rob would pour dead bugs and leaves out of his water bowl and the basset would rub his big head against Rob's shin almost like a cat. He'd even sat motionless while Rob removed a spruce needle from his eye one day.

I was feeling good by October. I'm sure Bill was part of the reason. Fortunately, my allergies don't include dogs. He took to sitting on my chaise as close to me as possible when I'd read. He made small sounds in his throat and started his ears swaying when birds lit in our tree. But he never barked. Things seemed to be at peace. We enjoyed occasional brown thrashers among the finches and chickadees. A pair of doves joined the group. Then several gorgeous bluejays showed up and I worried because of their reputation. But we never saw them run any of the other birds off. Once a feisty sparrow ran them off. When the jays shared the snags with cardinals it was a spectacular color show. We impaled suet and orange slices on the twigs. Sometimes it looked like a Christmas tree with live fluttering origami decorations. Bracket fungus began ruffling the trunk for added interest. By winter, the tree looked just like all the other hardwoods except for its unbalanced shape.

There hadn't been a sign of life next door for weeks. We assumed the Keelers were out of town again or visiting their daughter on the north side where they used to live. It was a mild weather period. Rob took some great slides of our finches with his new lens. And his shot of Bill and me looking out the window at our Bird Tree won an award in his camera club's regional show.

An early spring seemed imminent. We lay in bed talking one night and Rob said, "I've been thinking about the tree. I guess we ought to take it down soon. The limbs are starting to dry rot. It really would look terrible if it loses any more. Besides a storm could crash one into the window."

I sighed. "I wish we could build something that the birds would like as well. I saw the first robin yesterday. It acted like it was actually thinking of building a nest there. I've always hoped something would, but I decided it was too wide open for that. Birds like cover for their nests."

But next morning, there was the robin in the Bird Tree with sphagnum moss in its beak. I ran to the patio door and peeped from behind the draperies. Sure enough, the robin swooped down and swiped some more moss from around my potted boxwoods. I called Rob.

"I'd better rent a chain saw and cut it this afternoon."

"But--"

"Honey, you don't wanna wait until the nest is built and eggs are laid. I'll take off early and get it over with."

I was still thinking "but-- but" when he left. He was right, of course. The bird made a few false starts, dropped the moss, found another place on the branch and began again. By noon there was a rudimentary base in a crotch where the bark was sloughing off. If the loose flap tore off in the wind, the whole thing was likely to fall. The robin started bringing twigs and stalks of blond grass, nudging them into the pile of moss. "You must be a beginner," I said aloud. "That's the

(cont.)

most shiftless looking thing I ever saw." Bill wagged all over as if I'd told him his dinner was ready.

When Rob got home the nest was looking better. "I can't be sure if there's a pair or if it's only 1 bird. They're never there together."

"I've never seen a nest built from scratch before," he said.

"Neither have I. I didn't finish the laundry for watching."

"Well-- anywhere they go will be more protected than that."

He gave me a lop-sided smile and went out the back door.

The chain saw sputtered a few times then began a steady high-pitched hum. I almost didn't hear the telephone.

"Please stop him," a hoarse male voice said breathlessly.
"Don't let him cut it!"

"What? I-- "

"Don't let him cut the tree-- oh, he's--"

"Wh-- hello-- Hello?"

Obviously the party was gone. I went out to Rob. Mrs. Keeler was running toward him, yelling, "Stop! Stop!"

Rob cut the motor and climbed down the ladder telling her to move from under the big branch he'd started to saw.

"Please!" she cried. "Don't cut it down. You'll never know how much it's meant to Henry all winter. It's the only thing--" Her face contracted into horizontal folds. She seemed about to fall when we reached for her and led her into the kitchen.

We were calming her when I remembered the phone. "That must have been your husband who called! He sounded ill!"

"He is. He doesn't have long to live," she said softly.

(cont.)

"We'd better check on him, Rob. He just quit talking mid-sentence--"

All 3 of us raised Mr. Keeler. He was in bed, folded over the telephone on his legs. His lids flickered as we propped *him* against the pillows. His wife produced an ice pack for his forehead, then moments later gave him something in a glass which he drank obediently. I've never seen anyone move so efficiently as she did. Within 5 minutes he sat up and turned toward the window. "It's still there," he said weakly, half smiling. "I was afraid--"

"Don't try to talk yet, Henry." His wife adjusted the ice bag. "I'll explain things to them. You can tell them later." She nodded to us and we followed her to the rec room.

She was in control now. We sat down while she made drinks at a carved mahogany wet bar that wasn't there when the last people lived here. "Henry is dying of cancer," she said simply. "He's been where you saw him since March. He's not helpless yet, but he has these spells, and if he's up he falls. So the doctors want him to stay in bed or else go back to the hospital." She served our highballs and sat down tiredly. She looked at Rob and then at me. "I've wanted to apologize so many times, but Henry wouldn't let me. Then when he got so-- We talked about it and he finally admitted he'd been a rotter. But he has this terrible pride. He's also had terrible pain. Your tree with the birds has been such a blessing to him. I can't tell you how many hours he's watched them through the blinds."

(cont.)

She hesitated between words. It couldn't have been easy for her. I didn't know what to say. I heard Rob's ice rattle slightly.

She looked back at me. "The irony of it all wasn't wasted on him. He wants to apologize himself but he doesn't know how."

"We thought you were gone all this time," I said. "We'd have helped run errands-- sat with him so you could get out--"

She stared a moment. "I believe you would. Thank you. I've managed so far, but I really appreciate that. I've had everything delivered. He doesn't want me to leave." She looked at her lap a long time. "He really is so very sorry for what he did-- and about the dog. He had the poor thing put to sleep. He didn't want to bother with it after he realized it wasn't going to make you give in. Now he has nightmares about it. One night he woke up sobbing."

"Well," I smiled at Rob, "I think we can provide some relief in that matter."

She looked up questioningly as Rob told her, "The vet refused to kill the dog. We bought him. He's happy, healthy, well trained and we adore him."

"You-- you have him? Where? Where do you keep him?"

"He's a house dog now. And his run is on the other side of our lower level. Do you think Mr. Keeler would like to see him?"

"Oh, I'm sure he would! Just knowing the dog is alive will mean so much! I'll go look in on him. Could you bring the dog over now if he feels like it?"

We agreed. After she left the room I wondered aloud how Bill would react. "What if he growls or something?"

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"I don't think he'll do anything. I'll carry him, let Mr. Keeler pat him, then take him home. He'll be OK."

Bill had just been groomed and the rich browns of his coat gleamed against the white. His expression was one of meditative dignity. When Rob appeared at Mr. Keeler's doorway with his elongated burden, his arms overhung with ears, tail, and a stray foot, the man in bed broke into a gaunt grin. I couldn't recall ever seeing him truly smile before. It must have been his best feature when he was well.

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It was a painful scene. I wanted to look away. Mrs. Keeler was crying too. But Bill took charge. Out came his long tongue and ever so gently he licked both of Mr. Keeler's wrists.

"You're probably the luckiest mutt in the world to have such wonderful folks," his former owner said finally. They maintained eye contact for some moments without Bill turning away. "If you'll ask them to forgive me for being such an old reprobate it might help."

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"Atta boy, Bill. Tell him it's all forgotten," said Rob. "Now we'll go for that ride I promised him. We've gotta take back a chain saw I rented. See you later."

THE BIRD TREE

There are no reminders of the summer of '85 among my keepsakes, no snapshots, no ticket stubs, no recipes. Mostly I try to forget there ever was such a time. Except for the tree.

The last of June through early September was wretchedly hot and I developed a roster of allergies. In July I had a miscarriage. During the aftermath of depression I caught flu, and from then on, lavishly entertained every cold bug within 50 miles. "Serial miseries" my husband, Rob, called it. My doctor ordered me to bed several times. Fuming, sometimes crying, I'd try to read, but my eyes always snapped back to the window-- to be rewarded by a dead tree.

It was a wild cherry, no great asset when it was healthy-- unless you were waiting for a couple of Austrian pines to reach a point you could look up to. The cherry began dying 3 seasons before. We pruned off lifeless limbs until it was almost as graceless as the chimney skeleton of a burnt-down house. Each year we planned to cut it, then a few leaves would appear and Rob would say, "Oh, Jen, it might recover. I hate to--"

But the greening grew less each spring until there was

(cont.)

THE BIRD TREE

Blanche Hollingshead

There are no reminders of the summer of '85 among my keepsakes. Mostly I try to forget there ever was such a time. Except for the tree.

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Unfortunately, we had a new next door neighbor who told us not only how but when. "It's an eyesore and a disgrace," he said. "Makes the whole block look like Tobacco Road. I insist you get rid of it before this weekend. We're having out-of-town guests."

"Oh, Mr. Keeler, tell them we collect avant-garde sculpture," Rob kidded, having gotten nowhere with the real reason.

But Mr. Keeler didn't lighten up. His property edged an older more expensive area. His spruces and oaks were 40 feet tall and he could afford to be picky. Two days later he sent a tree surgeon over to talk about removing our "eyesore".

That night I telephoned him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Keeler, but we aren't ready to take the tree down. It's right beside my bedroom window and I really enjoy watching the birds while I'm stuck indoors recuperating. Today there were 5 doves, several cardinals and 2 yellow shafted flickers. The tree seems to attract them."

(cont.)

"I'll pay for it myself, Mrs. Holloway, if you'll call the man back!"

"It's not the cost, Mr. Keeler. The man you sent was very reasonable. When we decide to do it we may use him. But not yet. I hope to be well soon. Please be patient."

"I've been patient! There should be a law that says you can't ruin someone else's view!" he growled.

"The only place you can see it is from your guest room, for heaven's sake! By the time your guests use the room it will be dark. Just shut the blinds." I was getting upset, something I vowed wasn't going to happen. I said goodbye politely before things got worse. How'd we get such a nerdy old neighbor!

The Keelers' company came and went without incident. I got some new medication that didn't agree with me and had to spend the next week in bed watching the Bird Tree. When Rob got home from work he joined me at the window and we reveled in the regular visits of goldfinches. Every afternoon at 5:30 they came, buzzing the side yard like yellow bullets then lighting on a little pail of thistle seed Rob hung from a branch. During the mornings, their squabbles and acrobatics entertained me for hours. Around noon they'd be joined by black capped chickadees. I could almost set my watch by them. Then they swooped off in their roller coaster flight till supper. Afternoons brought red wing blackbirds and sometimes the downies, along with assorted sparrows.

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(cont.)

less nights. I woke suddenly to a strange sound. For a moment I didn't know what it was, then there was another series-- loud unmistakable barks. Almost under my window. Deep, up-from-the-ground noises only a hound can make. Squinting through the shadows, I could see a large low head moving in rhythm with each outburst. Wind shifted the shrubbery shadows and the light picked out a chain leading to Mr. Keeler's spruce. The animal was straining the chain off the ground, reaching within inches of our property line. It was amazing how often the dog could bark without stopping to inhale.

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Twice we called the police when it was really awful late at night. We discovered many other neighbors were doing the same. The squad car would arrive and stay only a few minutes. Once,

(cont.)

Mrs. Keeler came out and put the dog in the garage until the cops left. The last time we called, no one answered their door and the officers simply drove away. Later we learned that Keeler had cloutish friends on the force and in city government. Everyone who called the Keelers was told that we and our tree were the cause of the problem, and if they wanted peace they should pressure us to cut down the offender. One or two did try but Keeler's tactics were so stinky, most people sympathized with us. Which is not to say they became more tolerant of the basset hound.

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An hour later, Rob called from the vet's. "It's bad. The doc doesn't know if he can save him, but there's a chance. He thinks he just swallowed whatever it is not long ago. I'll be home shortly. Nothing more I can do."

Before Rob got back, the Keelers' car pulled into their garage. Angrily I picked up the telephone. "Mr. Keeler, this is Mrs. Holloway. I just want to tell you that someone poisoned

(cont.)

your dog and my hus--"

His voice boomed into mine, "Well now, I wondered how long it would be before you resorted to that. I expected it before now. Guess I'll just have to call the police myself this time, won't I?"

I couldn't believe my ears but I got my wits together enough to say, "Mr. Keeler, my husband found your dog sick and took him to the vet. No matter how we feel about you, we wouldn't harm an innocent animal."

Rob walked in as I spoke. He reached for the phone. "I just left the clinic, Keeler, and it looks like your dog might make it. But from what I just heard my wife say, you must have made an awfully reckless remark!"

"The dog's still alive?!" I could hear him easily. Rob backed the phone from his ear.

"Call Dr. Anderson at Lakeside and talk to him yourself." Rob hung up quietly.

He was furious when I related the entire conversation. He wanted to go over there. But we both calmed down. Even with Rob's efforts to save it, we were certainly prime suspects if the animal died. Keeler may have been baiting us from the beginning or this aspect may have occurred to him later. We decided to stay cool.

On Friday, the vet called as we asked, to report on Beast. "I've been dealing with pet owners for 20 years," he said, "and I've never run into anything like this. That man wants

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his dog put to sleep even though it's going to be perfectly OK."

By then I shouldn't have been shocked where Keeler was concerned. But there was more.

"I just can't put a healthy animal down, Mrs. Holloway. He refuses to pay the bill since he didn't authorize treatment. Says I should charge you folks. But I'm not. I'm going to keep the basset in lieu of payment. Can you beat that guy?"

"Oh, I'd like to. Are you going to sell the dog?"

"I guess that's the thing to do. My kennels are pretty full and I've got 3 afghans at home already. I'll make sure the buyer will be good to him. With a little training he'd be a nice pet. I'm certain he's got good blood."

I heard myself stutter, stop and start again. The vet must not have been sure of what I said either, but in answer to his "WHAT?" there was no mistaking my question:

"Will you sell him to us? I'll keep him in the house most of the time. And he can romp on the other side of the back yard. It's already fenced where we used to have a garden."

"You might be asking for trouble. That neighbor of yours is a nut."

"Yes. But he may never know we have the dog, either."

In the end, he relented and sold us Beast, only asking the amount of the bill. I needn't have worried what Rob would say.

The first thing we did was name him Bill since he'd never had a name to be called by before. In one of his snide gestures, Keeler had shown Rob the dog's papers when he was over there complaining. "You should be pleased to know you're being kept

(cont.)

less nights. I woke suddenly to a strange sound. For a moment I didn't know what it was, then there was another series-- loud unmistakable barks. Almost under my window. Deep, up-from-the-ground noises only a hound can make. Squinting through the shadows, I could see a large low head moving in rhythm with each outburst. Wind shifted the shrubbery shadows and the light picked out a chain leading to Mr. Keeler's spruce. The animal was straining the chain off the ground, reaching within inches of our property line. It was amazing how often the dog could bark without stopping to inhale.

Rob came in. "I'm sorry, honey. I called over there but no one's home. I'm going out and try to make friends with it and see if I can get it quiet."

It went on for almost a month, day and night. The birds seldom lit the first week. Finally they settled down to their old routines but nervously. We wondered how the dog's throat could survive a bark of such rough substance, seemingly able to shred anything it passed over. It certainly did that to our nerves whenever we removed our cassette earphones. Rob confronted Mr. Keeler and confirmed what we already knew: He'd get rid of the dog when we got rid of the tree. We even offered to buy the dog. It was not for sale. "But if it were, you couldn't afford it," Keeler added imperiously.

Twice we called the police when it was really awful, late at night. We discovered many other neighbors were doing the same. The squad car would arrive and stay only a few minutes. Once,

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Mrs. Keeler came out and put the dog in the garage until the cops left. The last time we called, no one answered their door and the officers simply drove away. Later we learned that Keeler had cloutish friends on the force and in city government. Everyone who called the Keelers was told that we and our tree were the cause of the problem, and if they wanted peace they should pressure us to cut down the offender. One or two did try but Keeler's tactics were so stinky, most people sympathized with us. Which is not to say they became more tolerant of the basset hound.

Since the Keelers were rarely at home, Rob had some success making friends with the dog and teaching it to mind him. Aided by canine biscuits and choice leftovers, he was getting it to hush on command. One night he took a bite of steak over to "Beast" as we called him. I heard the back door slam, Rob's feet race across the kitchen floor, then the telephone being dialed. When I got to the kitchen, Rob was hanging up. "I think somebody poisoned Beast," he said. "I got him out of that trick harness and put him in the car. Just called the vet and he's gonna open up for me. Be back as soon as I can."

An hour later, Rob called from the vet's. "It's bad. The doc doesn't know if he can save him, but there's a chance. He thinks he just swallowed whatever it is not long ago. I'll be home shortly. Nothing more I can do."

Before Rob got back, the Keelers' car pulled into their garage. Angrily I picked up the telephone. "Mr. Keeler, this is Mrs. Holloway. I just want to tell you that someone poisoned

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awake by the very best," he quipped. Rob only glanced at them and had no idea what name he was registered under. Bill already loved Rob for the attention and tidbits he'd provided. We'd long suspected he went for days without any other food. Rob would pour dead bugs and leaves out of his water dish, and the dog would rub his big head against Rob's shin almost like a cat.

I was feeling good by October. I'm sure Bill was part of the reason. Fortunately, my allergies don't include dogs. He took to sitting on my chaise with me when I'd read. He made a small sound in his throat and started his ears swaying when birds lit in our tree. He never barked. Things seemed to be at peace. We enjoyed occasional brown thrashers among the finches and chickadees and doves. Several gorgeous bluejays showed up and I worried because of their reputation. But we never saw them run any of the other birds off. When they shared the snags with cardinals it was a spectacular color show. We impaled suet and orange slices on the twigs. Sometimes it reminded me of a Christmas/^{tree} with live fluttering origami decorations. Bracket fungus began ruffling the trunk for added interest. By winter, the tree looked just like all the other hardwoods except for its unbalanced shape.

There hadn't been a sign of life next door for weeks. We assumed the Keelers were out of town again or visiting their daughter on the north side where they used to live. It was a mild weather period. Rob took some great slides of our finches with his new lens. And his shot of Bill and me looking out the window at our Bird Tree won an award in his camera club show.

(cont.)

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seemed imminent. We lay in bed talking one from here to end, "I've been thinking about the tree. I guess we ought to take it down soon. The limbs are starting to dry rot. It really would look terrible if it loses any more. Besides a storm could crash one into the window."

I sighed. "I wish we could build something that the birds would like as well. I saw the first robin yesterday. It acted like it was actually thinking of building a nest there. I've always hoped something would, but I decided it was too wide open for that. Birds like cover for their nests."

But next morning, there was the robin in the Bird Tree with sphagnum moss in its beak. I ran to the patio door and peeped from behind the draperies. Sure enough, the robin swooped down and swiped some more moss from around my potted boxwoods. I called Rob.

"I'd better rent a chain saw and cut it this afternoon."

"But--"

"Honey, you don't wanna wait until the nest is built and eggs are laid. I'll take off early and get it over with."

I was still thinking "but-- but" when he left. He was right, of course. The bird made a few false starts, dropped the moss, found another place on the branch and began again. By noon there was a rudimentary base in a crotch where the bark was sloughing off. If the loose flap tore off in the wind, the whole thing was likely to fall. The robin started bringing twigs and stalks of blond grass, nudging them into the pile of moss. "You must be a beginner," I said aloud. "That's the

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most shiftless looking thing I ever saw." Bill wagged all over as if I'd told him his dinner was ready.

When Rob got home the nest was looking better. "I can't be sure if there's a pair or if it's only 1 bird. They're never there together."

"I've never seen a nest built from scratch before," he said.

"Neither have I. I didn't finish the laundry for watching."

"Well-- anywhere they go will be more protected than that."

He gave me a lop-sided smile and went out the back door.

The chain saw sputtered a few times then began a steady high-pitched hum. I almost didn't hear the telephone.

"Please stop him," a hoarse male voice said breathlessly.

"Don't let him cut it!"

"What? I-- "

"Don't let him cut the tree-- oh, he's--"

"Wh-- hello-- Hello?"

Obviously the party was gone. I went out to Rob. Mrs. Keeler was running toward him, yelling, "Stop! Stop!"

Rob cut the motor and climbed down the ladder telling her to move from under the big branch he'd started to saw.

"Please!" she cried. "Don't cut it down. You'll never know how much it's meant to Henry all winter. It's the only thing--" Her face contracted into horizontal folds. She seemed about to fall when we reached for her and led her into the kitchen.

We were calming her when I remembered the phone. "That must have been your husband who called! He sounded ill!"

"He is. He doesn't have long to live," she said softly.

(cont.)

"We'd better check on him, Rob. He just quit talking mid-sentence--"

All 3 of us raised Mr. Keeler. He was in bed, folded over the telephone on his legs. His lids flickered as we propped him against the pillows. His wife produced an ice pack for his forehead, then moments later gave him something in a glass which he drank obediently. I've never seen anyone move so efficiently as she did. Within 5 minutes he sat up and turned toward the window. "It's still there," he said weakly, half smiling. "I was afraid--"

"Don't try to talk yet, Henry." His wife adjusted the ice bag. "I'll explain things to them. You can tell them later." She nodded to us and we followed her to the rec room.

She was in control now. We sat down while she made drinks at a carved mahogany wet bar that wasn't there when the last people lived here. "Henry is dying of cancer," she said simply. "He's been where you saw him since March. He's not helpless yet, but he has these spells, and if he's up he falls. So the doctors want him to stay in bed or else go back to the hospital." She served our highballs and sat down tiredly. She looked at Rob and then at me. "I've wanted to apologize so many times, but Henry wouldn't let me. Then when he got so-- We talked about it and he finally admitted he'd been a rotter. But he has this terrible pride. He's also had terrible pain. Your tree with the birds has been such a blessing to him. I can't tell you how many hours he's watched them through the blinds."

(cont.)

She hesitated between words. It couldn't have been easy for her. I didn't know what to say. I heard Rob's ice rattle slightly.

She looked back at me. "The irony of it all wasn't wasted on him. He wants to apologize himself but he doesn't know how."

"We thought you were gone all this time," I said. "We'd have helped run errands-- sat with him so you could get out--"

She stared a moment. "I believe you would. Thank you. I've managed so far, but I really appreciate that. I've had everything delivered. He doesn't want me to leave." She looked at her lap a long time. "He really is so very sorry for what he did-- and about the dog. He had the poor thing put to sleep. He didn't want to bother with it after he realized it wasn't going to make you give in. Now he has nightmares about it. One night he woke up sobbing."

"Well," I smiled at Rob, "I think we can provide some relief in that matter."

She looked up questioningly as Rob told her, "The vet refused to kill the dog. We bought him. He's happy, healthy, well trained and we adore him."

"You-- you have him? Where? Where do you keep him?"

"He's a house dog now. And his run is on the other side of our lower level. Do you think Mr. Keeler would like to see him?"

"Oh, I'm sure he would! Just knowing the dog is alive will mean so much! I'll go look in on him. Could you bring the dog over now if he feels like it?"

We agreed. After she left the room I wondered aloud how Bill would react. "What if he growls or something?"

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"I don't think he'll do anything. I'll carry him, let Mr. Keeler pat him, then take him home. He'll be OK."

Bill had just been groomed and the rich browns of his coat gleamed against the white. His expression was one of meditative dignity. When Rob appeared at Mr. Keeler's doorway with his elongated burden, his arms overhung with ears, tail, and a stray foot, the man in bed broke into a gaunt grin. I couldn't recall ever seeing him truly smile before. It must have been his best feature when he was well.

Bill's great eyes rolled up at Rob, then over to me. His ears twitched but there were no whistles or whines.

Mr. Keeler asked if he could rub his head and Rob bent down, aiming Bill. Mr. Keeler used one tentative finger. Then suddenly he raised up, took Bill's thick head and neck between his hands, bent his forehead to Bill's, and began to weep.

It was a painful scene. I wanted to look away. Mrs. Keeler was crying too. But Bill took charge. Out came his long tongue and ever so gently he licked both of Mr. Keeler's wrists.

"You're probably the luckiest mutt in the world to have such wonderful folks," his former owner said finally. They maintained eye contact for some moments without Bill turning away. "If you'll ask them to forgive me for being such an old reprobate it might help."

The tongue came out again, this time in a half pant that always looked like a clown's chuckle seconded by a hearty wag.

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