

Bird Whistle

Sheik

Bird Woman is at my fence again today. I know it is her because of the sound. She creeps up to the edge of my front garden near the bird feeder and whistles. She stands as motionless as a doe, hoping, I think, to blend in. As if the birds might think she is one of them. Unlikely. She is large and square, and with that flower print dress, they'd more likely believe her to be a bush than a bird. Still, she whistles to them beautifully. And, actually, some of them gather around.

In years past when Bird Woman stood at the fence, my wife went outside to greet her. She walked to the sidewalk with a warm, buttered croissant that they shared. Merrill wore her blue chenille robe, tied at the waist, and she'd take her coffee to the sidewalk and sip while Bird Woman ate and nodded.

My wife, Merrill, knew her since childhood. Even then she didn't speak.

"So what do you do at the gate?" I asked Merrill once when she returned to the kitchen after staying so long in the yard.

"We talk," she answered.

"You don't talk together," I joked.

Merrill didn't reply. Not with her voice. Instead, she looked at me with slanted, soft eyes, not hurt but disappointed. The look said that an old man like me should have known better than to laugh at others' miseries.

I slipped. I do slip sometimes. I have a cruel streak. It's not my best quality.

"We have things in common," she said.

That time, I kept my mouth shut.

It was years ago, but I still remember changing the subject, "May I join you for coffee?"

She already had the cup and was walking toward me.

That is the image I see so often when I wake up, get up and sit by the kitchen table—her lean, graceful body in the blue robe, her permed gray curls falling away from the soft matted roots. She is carrying my coffee in one hand and hers in the other. She smells like the flowers on our misbelief tree.

A young woman, a transplant to the neighborhood, once corrected me to say that the real name of the plant was Japanese plum. She would have continued rant about the Latin, botanical, designation had I not stopped her and reminded, "It is misbelief in New Orleans. Isn't that easier?"

That young woman was nothing like my Merrill, who never wasted her energy for impractical reasons.

I can imagine her now in the doorway, calling me to begin my day. It is because of her that I still rise, pull a suit out of the closet and head to the shower.

I met my wife in college. She was studying to be a teacher and singing with the student opera club on the weekends. She was full of ego and optimism then. She prided herself on her high notes, particularly her lilting warble in Carmen. I have a frayed

picture of her, head thrown back, then-auburn curls cascading, hands on her high hips just below her tiny waist. She is mid-Aria.

I was in pharmacy school hoping to become pre-med in one of the first classes at Xavier. So I had no time for clubs or dates. The one time I did go out, a girl sniffed me and said I smelled like cheap liquor.

I corrected her, "Formaldehyde."

Only after a bad week of studying, tests, and stressful evenings at the library did I allow my friends to convince me to come out to one of the college performances. It was Carmen, of course. By the end of the evening, I was humming.

Still, I waited almost a year — watching Merrill as she walked across campus, spying at her over the tops of my sandwiches, dropping my books to stare when she passed by — before I spoke to her. There was so much at stake.

I had my letter of acceptance to medical school in my hand when I asked her out.

She read it, folded it up and handed it back to me.

"You didn't need to wait so long," she said.

We spent one afternoon riding the bus to the lakefront, sitting on the steps and watching the waves. She brought thin chicken sandwiches on white bread with the ends removed. She had wrapped them in wax paper. After a few dates, we began holding hands.

Then, I went away. From medical school, I read the articles about her in the colored newspaper — her stage appearances, attendance at club luncheons, appointment to the elementary school — and I worked hard to return home.

I was making plans to get on at Flint-Goodrich Hospital when she wrote to me that she had received a scholarship to the Sorbonne. She was so excited, her letter was filled with exclamation points. But she knew I wouldn't be able to see her before she left town. Maybe I would meet her in Paris, she wrote and sketched a smile.

If I didn't have the money to get back to New Orleans before getting a job, I sure couldn't pay for a trip abroad.

Bird Woman has left the gate, I can see when I peer through the curtains. She still comes around even though Merrill is gone. Her whistles begin sometimes when I am in my deepest morning sleep. I suspect she is trying to spot a particular kind of bird.

Once when Merrill was alive, Bird Woman came so early in the morning that I wanted to open the front door and shout at her, "Please, some people are sleeping even if you aren't!"

I had already put the pillow over my ears, raised the white noise of my radio and started reciting memorized formulas in my mind.

Merrill was already up and out of the room. I suspect that she returned to our bedroom because she heard the radio buzzing.

"Listen, can't I just go and straighten this out?" I told her in anticipation of her going outside instead and encouraging this madness.

"No, you listen," she told me, "Listen." She put her hand on my arm, knowing I'm a sucker for touch. I quieted a little.

Bird Woman's sounds were almost the perfect imitations of the birds that visited our garden, and, I expect, hers: The twang of the bob-white, the screech of the mockingbird, and the chirp of a robin – so weak that one bird alone was nearly imperceptible.

Merrill and I looked through the curtains together. The darkness of morning had just lifted but Bird Woman was still standing in shadow. The daily mist glowed around her silhouette. She had spotted a hummingbird and her head was cocked to take in the sound of the wings, manic fluttering that sprinted the bird from one flower to the next. The bird was one spot of yellow that darted in front of Bird Woman, behind her and then to the side. Bird Woman stood still, her face in awe as if she had seen an apparition.

The mist was so heavy near the ground that Bird Woman seemed to be levitating slightly above the wet grass. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes so that I could see her ankles.

They were there.

And then our other neighbors appeared. They slammed their car doors as they left for their jobs. Then, the dogs began barking at the garbage men. Then, the chain-link gates slammed with sequential clinks as children departed for school.

Merrill never got to the Sorbonne. World War II began. Paris was off limits. And soon after, her father lost his job and she became the family breadwinner.

Her opera career vanished. She stopped singing. The light in her dimmed.

My residency at Flint-Goodrich didn't give us much time to date, only a few moments to meet between her job and mine. Still, they were my sunrise.

One early morning at the empty bus-stop, I got on one knee, gave her a little fleck of a diamond, and asked her to be my wife.

Nothing could have compared to her smile.

In a few years, as a doctor's wife, she was able to keep up some of her activities – the volunteer work, women's club, and support of the college opera association. She appreciated the music but she didn't sing, except around the house.

If I was lucky enough to be home, I stopped my chores to get closer to where she stood – washing dishes in the kitchen, folding towels in the laundry room, or cleaning the bathroom – and I'd listen without comment. The one time I did try to insist that she join a choir, she told me to mind my own business.

It was one of our rare arguments. I had invaded her privacy, she said. Didn't she deserve any?

I had to grant her that much.

I suspect that she thought singing was a young person's game. She was right, her moment had passed.

With her time then, Merrill took care of the family. On Sundays, we picked up her parents and brought them to church, first in my old blue Ford and then in our beige Cadillac. Later, all of her relatives came here for dinner. Merrill collected silver trays and soup tureens, punch bowls and ladles. She bought three sets of fine china so that we could invite as many cousins and friends as possible for the holidays. Even their children used the good plates and silver, and learned to wash them and put them away.

Then, little by little, the serving ware became dusty again as everyone we knew died or moved to the new areas.

The professional people like us, then their children, went to the suburbs where they could have driveways, refrigerators and freezers that the house-wiring could support and yards so their grandchildren could play catch without dodging an increasing number of cars in the street.

I wanted to go. But Merrill insisted we already had put down roots. She said oaks didn't transplant well, but they did grow stronger with age. What could I do? She was the oak. I stayed where I had made my nest.

She shouldn't be gone now. She was supposed to have lasted me out.

I don't have rounds at the hospital anymore. I just visit a few old patients.

I can still walk to some. My universe is the few square blocks around here. I think I must share it with Bird Woman. On one corner is a grocery store and, on another, a liquor store. The third in the square holds a music school. The house that Merrill and I bought takes up the forth corner—a large lot on Broad Street. It once sat across from a wide, green neutral ground. Now the grass collects tossed-aside bottles and plastic bags.

I keep my Cadillac well-tuned just for emergencies or the old ride to the store. There is always someone stopping to bring me food. Every few days it seems. So I don't complain.

In fact, Bird Woman provides me with too much excitement. This morning was like mating season, the racket she made.

I didn't go out to the fence like Merrill. But I usually will open the door and wave. That seems to calm her down. She will make her loudest racket if she hasn't seen me in a few days. I didn't have the strength for her this morning though. After a while, she left.

Later, on my way out to the car, I refill the bird feeder with sugar water, and I throw the ends of the toast out for the sparrows. There is a brown flock in no time. They're not afraid to gather near me and are practically in my way as I open the car door.

When Merrill was alive, I always opened the door for her. She sat on the side nearest to the curb. I made sure to park the car in that manner at night. That way I could open her door, and then walk around to open mine on the street.

Every time, she said, watch out for the cars, as if I were a child and unable to cross the traffic. This morning there is a car coming when I go to the driver's side. So I wait.

But the car stops. There are men I don't know. They ask my name.

"Dr. Bolden from Charity," I respond. "And you are?" Isaac, Pete, Aaron, they tell me. They hesitate before giving me their names so I wonder if they are telling the truth.

"You live here?" one asks.

I nod yes. That seems to satisfy them enough to keep going.

The neighborhood is different now. People have become suspicious of one another. People like us, once poor and then professional, who had worked our ways up—in segregation by

making our own self-help clubs, leaving the United States for schooling, and then breaking the barriers with legislation and marching – are oddities to young men who don't own suit coats or leather shoes. Young women point me out to their children sometimes when I sit on the porch as if I am part of a field trip. Other people, nervous and thin, try to come through the gate when I'm sitting to ask me for money or food. I offer them yard-work which they refuse – then tell them to leave, and they curse me. My first instinct is to return the greeting. But my better judgment says that could be dangerous.

Merrill was a patient woman. We were not only going to stay where we lived, she insisted, we were going to provide shade to the neighborhood. She gardened fearlessly in the front yard despite the bullet holes that appeared on our house and the ones nearby. She grew exotic plants and flowers to bring the birds. She decorated the porch with blossoms and even big, potted trees until someone came up to the house in the middle of the night with a truck and carted them off.

"They weren't our local thieves," she joked, "those were professionals. Probably from the suburbs."

She continued to hand around seedlings to our neighbors until our block was full of blooms that began in our garden.

All of our neighbors showed up at her wake and funeral. They filled my refrigerator with food. There were big casseroles that took a week to eat, even after I shared them with visitors. There were desserts that were so sweet, the tears came to my eyes. In the back of the freezer were the small dishes Merrill herself had made just for me.

Just before I semi-retired, Merrill began to go on house calls with me. She cooked our meals before we left the house and froze them so that when we returned we would have food.

One night, she helped me as I went to deliver a baby. It must have been two decades earlier. The woman around the corner was in labor. Someone came to knock on our door. Merrill and I

had a flashlight and negotiated our way in the dark. "The blind leading the blind," she joked on the way back. The streetlights were out because some of the young people had taken to shooting BB guns at the streetlights and tossing their sneakers on them. I couldn't figure out the attraction.

The woman in labor did not have time to go to the hospital, and the teenager who brought us to the house seemed to be in charge. I went to the bedroom while Merrill stayed in the front room with the teenager and the other children. Every time, their mother strained, I could hear them cry.

Then I heard the front door slam, Merrill had taken them outside to the dark front porch.

The baby came quickly after that. I was able to swaddle it with a towel and call an ambulance. It was a boy.

I went to tell Merrill and the children outside. She had closed the windows and doors so the children would not hear the labor. When I opened the screen, I heard her singing and them following softly along.

I don't know why I remember this as I get into my car to see a few old patients.

The young men are sitting on the step of the abandoned house next door when I come home just before dark. I wave and go inside.

The last of Merrill's prepared dishes is still in the freezer. Her cooked meals once stacked the shelves so that I also could have a warm dish if I ever came home and she was asleep. I don't think there will ever be a good time to warm this last one.

I fix myself scrambled eggs and toast for dinner. I watch television. I read a book. I make a few phone calls then go to bed.

I dream of Bird Woman. She is a cardinal that lands in the green grass. It picks at seeds for a while and then flies off. I hope death comes to me like that.

I toss and turn in bed. Merrill is not here. I finally get to sleep, then there is banging on the door.

I open it. Pete and Aaron are holding the third one.

"Hey," Pete says. They push inside.

The shirt of the third is soaked with blood.

"You should bring this man to a hospital," I say.

"Not happening," Aaron responds.

"Do something," says Pete.

I can see it's a gunshot wound and I have been designated to fix it. I don't say anything. I cannot extrude the bullet and, without letting him know that, I get my bag to patch him. I have a little topical anesthesia, but luckily no opiates that might inspire them to worse crimes. I give the victim a few shots of good whiskey and while his friends drink the rest, I stitch the skin closed. I offer him antibiotics and try to send them away.

Instead, they begin to fall asleep on my sofa.

Against my will, but exhausted, so do I.

It is still dark when they wake me up.

"Doc, give us something to eat on the road," Pete says.

He is in my refrigerator taking bread and meat to make sandwiches. He takes sodas and beer. He moves to the freezer to see what it contains. His hand lights on Merrill's last meal.

I tense and he can see it.

"What's this?"

"You don't want it," I answer.

In reality, it is probably only just a little turkey from an ancient Thanksgiving party with gravy, cornbread stuffing, and peas. I think of giving him the menu, but I hear myself saying, "Don't touch it. It's mine."

He takes the food out of the freezer and he waves it in front of my nose.

I say quietly, "Please leave it alone." I am fairly growling.

But he has no subtlety. To him, it's a good time to play the fool.

He is waving the food away from me in figure eights then pushes it into the microwave. As he turns from me and presses the button, I rush to reach the plastic container. He blocks the way. I

push him and he trips backwards and I fall in his direction. He curses at me as I hit the ground.

He prepares to give me a kick. But his crony hurries in to stop him. For this, he gets cursed as well. As they hurl expletives at one another, I steady myself and get up. They are both glaring at me once they settle down. I am glaring back in a stand-off.

I continue to breathe hard. I can feel that my pajama bottoms have slipped past my waist. I pull them up and stand evenly on two feet. The microwave beeps and the crook puts the food on the table.

Then we all hear it. There is whistling along the fence line. At first, it is barely audible. Then it gets louder and louder.

"What the hell," says Pete.

Merrill and Bird Woman had a standing code that if they didn't see one another in a week that one of them would check on the other. I don't know how they arranged this. But my wife told me that they had an agreement.

In her stead, I had been waving regularly to Bird Woman. But this week, I've been hiding from her.

She is whistling louder and louder. Now, I hear her footsteps on the porch. There is a knock and whistling at the door.

"Damn. She is going to wake up the neighborhood," Pete says, "Shut her up."

"She's coming for food," I tell the men, and I quickly grab the plastic container and head for the door.

At the porch, I hand it to Bird Woman. "Merrill wanted you to have this," I say.

She takes it, having no sense of time, and, probably a fluid conception of death.

I hear the back door slam. The men have run away. I rush into the house to secure the back lock.

Then, I return to the front again to find Bird Woman. She hasn't gotten far. She has opened the plastic container, picked out

hot bits of the meal, and is cooling them in her open hands. Then, she is scattering food to the sparrows. Some catch it in mid-air.

Driving Without a License

“I was hurrying to get the cat’s eye drops,” I give the reason for my speeding to the officer. He is a cool drink of water – young and healthy, dimples in his cheeks. He is looking kindly at me and seems to be somewhat amused as if I were his mother. “The cat, Winky, is going blind in both eyes and keeps running into the furniture.”

He wants to laugh, so I say it more seriously, squinting so the water rises to my pupils. “If he hits one more thing, he might get a brain hemorrhage.” I draw out the last word with all its syllables. “Hem-more-edge.” Like devastated and incapacitated, it’s a good word.

He asks me for my license, but I know that’s just routine. It’s required, but some cops make an exception. I appear contrite so that he will bend the rules.

“I never, never should have gotten behind the wheel in this state.” It slips out quickly but I hope he’ll interpret it. People