

## *A Bird's Death*

DANA LAUREN

Her arms were full of overstuffed grocery bags, so Caroline did not see the tiny thing and nearly crushed it underfoot while trying to unlock the back door. It wasn't until she was returning for more packages left in the car that she saw the tiny bird, still and quiet like a furry rock, on the black rubber welcome mat.

She was indecisive as she looked past the back yard to the garage. She thought about the packages in the hot trunk of her car. The baby bird was not going anywhere, but the ice cream she'd bought would melt if she didn't put it away immediately. She pulled the mat with the bird aside and went back to her car.

It took ten minutes to sort and stack the groceries in the kitchen. Because of an infestation of pantry pests some months ago, Caroline was meticulous about sealing dry goods in plastic bags before putting them away. She twisted the necks of the plastic bags tightly and choked them with wire ties. Cheerios, flour, sugar—even coffee and tea—everything was suffocated the same way.

She finished organizing the groceries and returned to the patient baby bird on the black mat. It had not moved an inch. Caroline would have thought it dead if not for the rapid puffing of its downy chest as the poor thing struggled to breathe.

She knelt down to study it. It must be a few weeks old for it had only a few feathers mixed in with the fuzzy down and its beak and feet were still soft and tender, not scaled and rough like adult birds.

Concerned about how her touch might feel to something so small, she lowered her finger carefully until it rested lightly on the back of the baby's neck. She stroked it so gently that the bird might not have felt her; at least, it gave no sign if it did. She wondered how it had known to come to her for help and how, in such a fragile condition, had it managed to crawl to her door.

"You're a smart little bird, aren't you?" She spoke softly, almost whispering. "Lucky, too. The cat next door could have gotten to you first." The bird's head bobbed with each shallow breath, as if nodding in agreement. "What am I going to do with you?" Caroline asked.

There was only one tree in the small back yard—a tall pine. To prevent her children from climbing it, Caroline had ordered the gardener to hack off all branches up to five feet. Caroline lifted her hand to the nearest branch and bent her head back to study the thick mats of needles, searching for a nest she knew was there but couldn't see. Gray birds with white markings had been flirting on the wood fence and flying into the tree since early spring. Recently, she had heard hungry shrieks of newborns at five in the morning; loud, furious, shrill pleas that pierced the bedroom windows and forced Caroline to bury her head beneath a pillow. But the nest was now quiet and she didn't see any birds.

"Did you lose a baby?" she called up through the silent branches, hoping to get an answer of some kind—an angry screech perhaps, a swoop of beating wings, a chorus of hungry chirps. Were they sleeping? Did they know a baby had nearly died from a fall and miraculously found its way to her doorstep? Did they want the bird back? Of course they did. Animals certainly love their young. She leaned against

the tree trunk and contemplated how she could find the nest in the tree and return the baby.

They must love their young, Caroline thought. They must mourn the loss of a baby. Two years ago, she had decided to terminate a pregnancy that was already nearly five months along, after learning that the child would have had spinal deformities. Cannot bring such a child into the world, they told her, think what it would do to the family. A horrible loss, nevertheless. A baby boy. Lucky to have found out...

Carefully lifting the weightless bird between her thumb and forefinger, she placed it on her palm. The baby shuddered and chirped and Caroline cooed to calm it. She stroked the soft gray wings, already beginning to show the white color markings of its parents. She remembered once hearing something about birds rejecting a chick if human hands have touched it and she hoped it wasn't true.

Holding the baby like a glass bauble that would blow away, she carried it into the kitchen and set it on the white-tiled counter. She went in search of a shoebox that she would line with a soft washcloth and shredded cotton balls. She thought how she could feed the baby with an eyedropper and tweezers and keep it warm by setting the box under a bright lamp. She'd send her excited children on bug-catching missions—food for the baby. She'd cuddle the bird until it got over the unbearable fear that would surely kill it even if the fall from the tree had not.

Caroline kept her shoes in the original boxes, ordered neatly in the closet with photographs of the contents taped to the outside. Her husband said it was a perfect example of Caroline's excessive

attention to trivial detail. He called her “obsessive.” Her children giggled at the row of shoe mug-shots, and at her clothing, which was organized by color and type. If I am willing to sacrifice a shoebox for the baby, Caroline thought, I must not be that obsessive.

She returned to the kitchen with the cotton-lined box and reached to lift the chick from the plate. Her hand jerked back; there were dark mites crawling over the white tiles on the kitchen counter. At first she thought the mites were specks of dirt, for they barely moved and were smaller than the sand-sized pests that had invaded her pantry the year before. But they were indeed moving, slowly, exploring the tile, searching for more territory.

Caroline exhaled with disgust, quickly brushed the bird from the counter into the shoebox and set the box outside, several feet away from the kitchen door. She hurried back into the kitchen and scrubbed the white-tiled kitchen counter, first with dishwashing soap, then with bleach. Her skin felt itchy and she imagined mites crawling on her. She searched her hands and arms but found nothing. Nevertheless, she scratched soap up to her elbows and under her fingernails. She scrubbed harder at the thought that the mites might be on the welcome mat and moving invisibly through her house by now. Into the pantry.

She should have known. The baby bird didn't fall from the nest, it had been pushed out, abandoned, because it was diseased. So it wouldn't contaminate the rest of the family.

Suddenly, she pulled off her blouse and jeans, unhooked her bra and removed her panties. She shoved her clothes into the washing machine, dumped in more detergent than was necessary, and set the

temperature to the hottest level. Then she raced naked through the house to the shower, where she scrubbed her hair and body thoroughly, using her fingernails to scrape her scalp, thighs, and arms.

She let hot water pound down onto her head and flow over her shoulders and back until she was almost scalded from the heat. She hoped the water would burn through and extinguish her anger, like fire on fire.

The hot water calmed her. She thought that maybe in God's great design of things, the baby was a sign, or an omen; that for some reason, the bird had made it all the way to her doorstep just to seek her help and she mustn't reject it now. Maybe she was chosen for the job. She wondered if it was somehow related to her own children. Or the fetus whose life she had ended. What would be the consequences of ignoring a divine sign?

She returned to look at the sick bird in the shoebox and sighed more out of helplessness than pity. What *could* she do?

She telephoned a veterinarian office with a large boxed advertisement in the phone book. A sweet-voiced young woman answered.

"My name is Caroline Braum. I found a very sick baby bird in my yard and I don't know what to do to help it." There was the same soft urgency in her voice that she used whenever she called the children's pediatrician, when one of them had a fever, or a pain.

The woman in the vet's office asked, "What's the matter with it? Is it hurt?" The eager concern in the woman's voice made Caroline feel confident that a cure for the baby was at hand.

"Well...it's covered with very tiny bugs—mites, I guess—and it's barely moving or chirping—"

“Aww—”

“—and its eyes are mostly closed. I found it at my doorstep, can you believe that? He came to me for help.”

“Aww, the poor thing. I wish we could help, but we don’t treat birds here. Just dogs and cats.” The young woman sounded sorry, even ashamed, about the inadequacy of the vet’s office.

Dread spread from Caroline’s abdomen. “Do you know someplace that treats birds?” she asked. “Don’t people have pet parakeets?”

“Sure. I can give you the name of a place,” the young woman said. “But honestly? When a baby is infested like that? It’s dying.”

Caroline knew the woman in the vet’s office was right. But she asked weakly, “Isn’t there a, a de-bugging spray or something? Can I try bathing it? Isn’t there something I can do?”

“I’m afraid not. It would be best to put it out of its misery.”

Caroline thanked her and hung up. But what was there to be thankful for? For having to kill a baby bird? And she would have to do it soon because the children would be home in an hour and she didn’t want them to see the bird. To see Mommy kill it.

Outside, the shoebox where the chick sat breathing rapidly was already strewn with little brown mites. The baby slowly opened a swollen eye and looked briefly at Caroline as if to say *oh, it’s you*. Such a perfect little bird in miniature, Caroline thought. So round and soft, like a fluffy tennis ball.

Just the week before, Caroline had accidentally stepped on a snail in the driveway. She had gone outside to get the morning newspaper and was scanning the headlines on the way back to the house, paying no attention where her feet landed. Then she felt the crunch of the

snail's shell and the gooey lump under her shoe; electric tingles shot up her leg and she was revolted by the sensation. Now, chilled just by the memory, she wondered how she could possibly kill a baby bird.

The first thing that came to her mind, and only because she had just remembered the snail, was crushing the chick underfoot. But that was completely out of the question; she didn't want to *feel* the baby die, to *feel* her foot stamp out its life. She grew increasingly upset with the invading thoughts that followed, completely unspeakable solutions: Chopping it with an ax, setting it afire, twisting its neck. Her hands clenched and she was unnerved by her capacity—her *ability*—to think something so gruesome; it was as if somewhere inside her, there was a viciousness that hid until an opportunity arose allowing it to jump to attention and joyfully present itself. She shivered and shook her head to repel the grotesque images.

She wiped sweat off her forehead, surprised that she hadn't noticed how hot it had become. A gray bird with white markings on its wings appeared and settled briefly on the white picket fence before flying to the large pine tree. "Hey!" Caroline shouted angrily after it. "You're the mother—you handle it!"

Suddenly, the pine tree came alive with the frantic chirping of the babies in the hidden nest. The mother had returned with food and they were clamoring for a share of whatever she had brought. Caroline wondered if the mother bird remembered the baby on the ground. Did birds grieve? And if so, for how long? Did they have memory? Or is rejecting a baby who is frighteningly ill simply a matter of instinct?

The baby bird in the shoebox startled Caroline with two painful-

sounding chirps of its own. She watched it spasm, flutter its wings, stretch its head painfully, trying to reach for food, hearing its mother and siblings in the nearby tree. Caroline couldn't stand it. She pressed a hand to her brow and darted into the kitchen. She ripped several paper towels from the wall holder and returned outside.

It was eleven-thirty; her five-year-old would be home from kindergarten soon, dropped off by a carpooling mother. If her little girl saw the baby bird, she'd want to hold it. The mites—they'd get on her little hands, crawl up her arms, contaminate her.

She wrapped the baby gently in several layers of paper towels, rolling it into a loose shroud. The chick suddenly began to chirp and squirm frantically, summoning all its remaining energy to resist her. "No, don't, don't," Caroline cooed to the baby, trying to calm the fluttering bundle. It was like a beating heart in her hands; Caroline could hardly bear to hold it. Her hands shook as she set the distraught baby at the foot of the pine tree. Above them, the nesting chicks were being fed and they chirped wildly, unaware or not caring that a sibling was suffering below them. "Shut up!" Caroline yelled at the high branches, but they kept up with their indifferent cries. The baby in the paper-towel shroud was terrified; it screamed relentlessly.

Caroline ran to the garage and brought back a large heavy shovel. With a few powerful stomps and thrusts, she dug a hole a foot deep at the base of the pine tree. The soil, soft from recent rains, gave way easily. The hungry birds screeched above her. "Shut up!" she yelled, again. It was hot. Sweat trickled around her earlobes and her fingers tingled. Adrenaline, created by the exertion of digging, made her feel strong.



The baby bird at her feet grew hoarse, but it still cried. The chirping above seemed even louder. Caroline glared up at the tree. “Shut up!” She grasped the shovel tightly. “Shut up!” she screamed as she swung the blade up high. “Shut up!” she screamed over and over as she crashed the heavy flat back of the blade onto the paper towel bundle; screaming to shield her ears from the terrible sounds of birds crying and little bones breaking.

\*\*\*

The gardener who came every Wednesday to mow the lawn and trim the bushes was knocking at the back kitchen door. He was Korean, a shy man—or at least Caroline thought so because he rarely spoke to her. His knock was timid and irregular and Caroline was annoyed at having to come down the stairs to answer him.

“Mr. Kim. Hello,” she said, finally answering the door. She frowned slightly to show him that she knew he would only approach her if absolutely necessary, that there must be some cause for concern.

Jay Kim ducked his head and smiled. “Miss Braum,” he began, working hard on the difficult sounds of her name. “Last week...I find bird. Put here.” He pointed to his feet, to the black rubber mat.

“You put the bird here?”

Mr. Kim frowned as if worried that she didn’t understand him.

“Bird,” he said. “Little bird. I put here. No see bird?”

“Yes. I found the bird—”

“Yes?”

“Sick bird. Died. Dead.”

“Die?” He waited as if expecting her to say more. She looked away from his disappointed face and felt as if he were blaming her. He

must have thought he had put the baby in trustworthy, knowledgeable hands that would heal and nurture it. Oh, aren't we pathetic, she thought. We're so full of useless emotions. The bird hadn't struggled to her door in an instinctual urge to survive. She had only assigned that sentiment to it.

"I'm sorry," she said to the gardener, shrugging weakly.

Mr. Kim turned away and dropped his shoulders with a sigh.

"Too bad for bird," he said. He shook his head; his face twitched and it seemed as if he was trying to pluck the air for words he wanted to say but couldn't translate. She wished they could talk, she wanted to tell him how she had tried to save the baby's life. But maybe it was better this way. If she could tell him what she did, he still might not understand. □