

THE BIRD YARD

Brogan walked straight into a nylon net. It touched his face in a way that reminded him of the entrance to a ghost train, and he staggered back as finches of every description took fright.

Some made for trees that had been planted around the aviary. Others flew skyward, their progress halted by the mesh. They clung to the wire with slender claws, their bodies upside down, keeping the strangers in view by twisting their heads into impossible angles. Many appeared to fall as they freed themselves, only to turn mid-flight, entering the house through open windows.

A bird the size of a plum flew past, its tail wafting in flight like a long, thin reed, turquoise turning to green. Then it was gone, and Brogan looked the length of the yard to find that it was much as he imagined the surface of the moon might be.

What had once been a grassed area was now nothing more than bare earth. At some point, an attempt had been made to concrete it, but the concrete had sunk before hardening, and small craters had been left where rain had settled into pools. Most were no more than inches deep, husks of seed floating on the water, ebbing towards the edges, sitting there like scum.

A bright red bird, its back dusted with a smattering of stars, swooped down to land belly gently in a pool. It dipped a nervous beak down into the water, then rose up, as if it had made some inspection of the boy and had returned to the trees to report back. *It's only a boy, a very small boy, like others who've been here before him.*

Roly stood in the yard, small and dark, his movements timid. He dipped his hand in a polythene bag, pulled out a fist full of seed, and scattered it onto the ground as Moranti called from the gate:

"That Gouldian you sold me..."

The hand to the bag, the seed to the ground, a Zebra darting to Roly's feet, the back of its wing speckled like the coat of a fawn.

"Wh... what about it?"

"Dead," said Moranti.

"You sh... should care for them better."

"You telling me I don't know how to keep my birds?"

Roly pinched the corners of the bag between his index fingers and thumbs, flipped it a couple of times and tied the ends. It was reminiscent of the way in which Brogan's mother had tied his sandwiches for school, and the emptiness returned to punch him hard in the gut.

"There's a high mor... mortality rate to keeping finches...."

"It's even higher when people sell you diseased birds."

"I sold you a healthy bird."

"....so healthy it's dead," said Moranti, and Roly's speech impediment worsened as he took offence at the comment:

"What ... do you w... want?"

"A refund."

A cardboard box stood by a nesting shed, the damp lid having collapsed inwards to reveal the remains of finches. They were Scarlets, mostly, their feathers red as though each had been pierced through the throat.

"How ... do I know it's d... dead?"

Moranti dipped his hand into a pocket of the long gabardine coat, brought out the bird, and handed it to Roly, who studied it as if, by doing so, he could determine the cause of death. He turned the bird in his hands, the fingers deft, the tiny stiffening form so feather light, he could flip it with a finger and thumb, turning it over and over.

"I s... sold you a bl... black-headed Gouldian. This is r... red."

"Black," said Moranti.

"R... red," said Roly, but he reached into a back pocket and drew out some money. He peeled a fifty pound note from a bundle, handed it to Moranti, then tossed the corpse of the Gouldian into the box with the Scarlets. Then he approached Brogan and smiled a little nervously, as if expecting the boy to turn his back, and as he smiled, Brogan noticed a very slight imperfection to his lip, something that wasn't noticeable unless you got up close:

"You li... like finches?"

"Don't know," said Brogan, shyly. "I don't know much about them."

"Well," said Roly, a little more confidently: "What ... whatever you do, don't listen to Mr. Moranti. Every time I s... sell him a bird, it comes back wrap... wrapped in a ... r... rag."

It wasn't a comment Moranti cared to hear. "Come on, let's go." But as he made for the gate, Roly raised a hand and snapped his fingers.

Instantly, the birds became unsettled. They didn't simply dart away but swarmed around the yard. Round and round they flew like a plague of terrible insects, and Brogan covered his eyes as they smacked against his face.

Moranti stood at the gate. "Brogan," he shouted, but Brogan couldn't move, afraid to take his hands away from his eyes.

Roly continued to snap his fingers, whipping the birds to a frenzy, and then he lashed out, lowered his hand, and opened his palm a fraction.

Instantly, the birds appeared to settle, and Brogan took his hands from his face to find a bird on Roly's outstretched palm. It cowered there, too stunned

to move, unaware that essentially, it was free, that at any given moment, it could hop from Roly's palm and flutter to the ground or fly to the trees.

"Y... yours," said Roly. "If you w... want."

Brogan took it from him, cupped it in his hand, and felt its heart hammering under the plumage.

"A ... T... Tiger Finch," said Roly, and although it was plain and brown, the feathers dull by comparison with many other finches, it seemed to Brogan a beautiful thing, a soft and terrified thing. He wanted the bird to know that he couldn't have liked it more - not even if it had been the plum-coloured bird with the reed-like, turquoise tail.

Moranti had left the yard and, finding himself alone, Brogan suddenly ran towards the net, but as he ducked beneath it, Roly called after him:

"Y... you can come back if you like."

"What for?" said Brogan.

"To see the birds."

Brogan looked unsure about that and, hurriedly, Roly added:

"I'll give you another b ... bird."

Brogan could hear Moranti revving the van. "All right," said Brogan.

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