

## To Hear the Birds Sing

The old man was sitting on his porch, rocking. It was a winter day, but the man was warm in his wool sweater, smoking his pipe and drinking a cup of hot tea. From the corner of the porch swung a little bird house that his father had made, many years before. All his life the man had watched the birds come to this birdhouse to eat, especially in winter when food was hard to find on the ground. They loved the seeds and little bits of suet that the man, and his father before him, had put out to keep them alive through the season of cold and snow.

Another man walked down the lane, his breath steaming in the cold air. His big black overcoat covered him as it would a scarecrow: this man was tall but must have been very thin, thought the old man rocking on his porch. Just as he thought to invite the stranger to have a cup of tea and maybe a muffin or two with him, the stranger put his hand on the gate latch and entered the yard. He paused a moment, looking up at the old man rocking on the porch. His face was covered by the shadow of the overcoat that was pulled up around his neck, the large scarf that flapped in the cold breeze, and the wide-brimmed hat that hung down around his eyes.

The man rocking on the porch was suddenly afraid. The stranger strode forward now and stood at the foot of the porch. His hands were thrust in his overcoat pockets and his bony wrists could be seen shivering white with cold. The stranger's cheeks were dark and hollow; his teeth chattered.

The man in his rocking chair started to stand up, but found that he couldn't. He started to speak, to offer the stranger some tea, but found that he couldn't utter a word.

The rasping voice of the stranger croaked out of the shadow that was his face. It was not a pleasant sound, the dry clacking of his gums. “I’ve come for you, my friend,” the stranger said.

“Wh—what do you mean? Who are you?” The old man on the porch felt suddenly very cold, colder than he had in all his life.

“You know very well who I am, and what I mean,” said the stranger. “It’s time.”

“Time?”

“Come, come. I have all the time in the world. But you, my friend—this is the end of your time.”

“Oh—no—no—” the old man stammered. He tried to rise again and couldn’t. A bird peeked out of the birdhouse, seemed to shudder, and flew away as fast as it could.

“The birds...” the old man said, with a desperate energy now. “I can’t leave my birds. They would have nothing to eat for the rest of the long winter.”

“I will take care of your birds.”

The old man shook his head emphatically. He could not trust the stranger to feed the birds from this porch, every day, as he and his father before him had so faithfully done. “No; they trust me,” he said. “They know me, and they depend on what I give them. If only you would let me stay here the rest of this winter, to feed them...”

“Ah, here is yet another excuse,” the stranger groaned. “I think I’ve heard them all by now.”

“Oh, but please, you must understand...”

“Stop your begging,” the stranger snapped. “I detest the way you people snivel and grovel like this at the end. With no sense of dignity.”

At this rebuke the old man composed himself. Not resigned to his fate—rather, steadfast in his will, if only as the moment required.

The stranger eyed him, frowned, settled back on his heels. Then a light came into his larger eye, the left. He spoke less harshly now, his voice taking on the melodic tone of a private amusement: “Well, look. I am patient. I have, as I say, all the time in the world. If it pleases you, I will, as you suggest, permit you to go on throwing crumbs to your miserable little creatures who haven’t even the wherewithal to fend for themselves...”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, kind sir!” The old man wrung his hands in relief, nearly sobbing.

“Don’t interrupt! I haven’t finished. “In return you must prove your worthiness—before I keep my end of the bargain. I will return tomorrow, and the next day, and the next. Each of those days you will have to give me satisfaction in my curiosity, and I am oh so curious a fellow. Tomorrow for instance, you are going to tell me this: When you were a child of four, your mother baked you a cake on a special occasion. What I would like to know, I mean really like to know, I mean what I really must know, is this: What kind of cake was it? A simple matter, really. Have your answer for me, sir. I will leave with your answer tomorrow, or I will leave with you.”

The old man closed his eyes in fright and concentration, trying hard to remember even now, before the stranger left. But it was no good. He remembered no cake, let alone what kind it was. When he opened his eyes to appeal to the stranger for other terms, to strike a different bargain, a fairer agreement, he saw to his great dismay that the stranger was gone. The gate swung wildly on its rusty hinges, then stopped in an instant, with a final stationary quiver in the

chill air.

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The man was terrified. How could he possibly remember such a thing as the stranger demanded? And what would the stranger ask next? Ah, better not even to think of that, when the first question was impossible enough. The man paced around the house all day, worrying so much he couldn't eat. He went outside and shoveled snow. He climbed up on the porch roof and repaired some shingles. He fed the birds again, though they had plenty of food already.

As the man turned away from the feeder tray with his bag of seed, a bold little hummingbird flew out of nowhere to within an inch of the old man's ear. It whispered, and whispered again. What was it saying? It seemed to be saying, or trying to say something. The old man knew very well that birds, especially hummingbirds, can't talk. Yet he seemed to hear words in the whispering, at least one word. What was it, what was that again? It sounded like "poppyseed"... poppyseed! The tiny bird with its iridescent purple head darted away.

Aha! The old man lit up like a Christmas tree. That was it! It was a poppyseed cake. His mother had made it for his fourth birthday, and he could taste it in his mouth as if he'd eaten it for his afternoon tea. And his father had carefully swept the crumbs off the kitchen counter and tossed them outside for the birds.

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Now the old man smiled the next morning when the stranger opened the gate and walked up to the porch, for he had the answer for him. The stranger did not seem pleased, however, as he stood there stamping his long thin legs in the breeze. The black pants flapping on the stranger's legs, thought the old man, looked like flags on a couple of flagpoles.

"Never mind," said the stranger, as if reading the old man's thoughts. "I have another one for you, if you remember. The envelope, please... ah, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. When you were two—dig a little deeper, now, my wise old friend—you were given a little puppy. The mutt died, I'm sorry to say. Remember his name? Don't kill yourself over this one. I'll be back, same time, same station. Wear your walking shoes tomorrow, I'd advise."

The stranger whirled and walked off, cackling to himself. The old man stopped rocking, feeling despondent. Now what could he do to remember? As far as he knew he'd never even had a dog, his whole life. The name? A dog could be named anything. This was ridiculous. Rover, Sam, Pooch, Cinders, Laddie, come on, Wee Willie, Bowser, Twinkles... Rumpelstiltskin, for that matter! It was no use.

Again the old man paced around the house, this time cleaning and dusting, cooking and eating all day. Plenty of dog names came to him, none sounding right. How could he remember the name if he couldn't even remember the dog?

In the evening he went out with the supper he couldn't finish and fed it to the birds. Three of them were perched on the feeder tray, bobbing their heads together as if in conference. Just as the old man was about to go back into his house, one of the birds, a fat, bandy-legged sparrow, flew to his shoulder and gave him a peck on the earlobe.

"Ow! Wasn't that food I just gave you good enough?"

“Peepers,” the bird seemed to say.

“Eh, what’s that?” The old man heard something almost familiar.

“Peepers,” said the bird once again.

The old man’s mind was filled in a flash with the image of a thin brown puppy, lying in its shallow grave dug in the back yard.

Tears came to his eyes, for the little dog had died even before growing up. Its name, the old man recalled clearly now, was Jeepers.

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The stranger listened with dark countenance to the old man telling his sad little tale of childhood.

“All right,” he informed the old man at last. “Enough of that. Sick puppies, starving birds, old men... listen, I have patience for one more visit with you, and one only before the die is cast.

The day you were born—the very moment of your birth, in fact—what were the first words you heard spoken, by your father?”

This was totally unfair. But there was nothing the old man could do about it. He got up and went into the house, leaving the stranger standing at the foot of the porch. He didn’t care if the stranger waited there till the next day. He hadn’t gained much, really, with these extra two days, with the help of his kind little friends, the birds. Two days longer to live, and now this. The birds could not be of any help to him now. What would they have known about the scene of his birth?

There was nothing to be done about it. No more snow to shovel; no more shingles to fix. No more meals to cook; no more feeding the birds.

The old man felt extremely weary. He went straight upstairs and collapsed on his bed. With his last bit of strength he pushed his legs under the covers. He still had all his clothes on, even his shoes. But he lay there shivering, growing colder and colder. Maybe this was it, after all. Maybe, the old man thought with nearly a smile, I'll be gone even before he comes for me tomorrow.

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Then came blackness, and light, and blackness and light flashing alternately faster and faster, like a succession of all the nights and days the man had ever known. Until, when he opened his eyes and saw that it was morning again, he could feel his body no longer. Still, he felt alive enough, awake enough, to see. This room was the same, yet somehow different. The curtains were brighter, the paint lighter, the flowered wallpaper seeming almost to breathe with the fresh air of a meadow. And there were people here, he sensed, though he couldn't see them. He could sense someone in the bed: was it himself, or someone else? He heard low voices. He strained his ears to hear. Then the sound of footsteps, ringing on the wooden stairs... coming up to his room. The voices hushed. The doctor, maybe? The door creaked open. A shadow fell on the old man's face. The stranger had come, come for him. He closed his eyes tightly.

The voices were fading. Then, at the last, the voice of the old man's father boomed in his ears. He couldn't make out the words. The air in the room had become stifling. The old man felt

with horror a tickling on his face, on his throat, felt the bony hand from the overcoat pocket, with its clawlike fingers, the sharp, ragged nails.

He had one last, desperate wish; and with all his strength he cried out, “Open the window—I want to hear the birds sing!”

The window flew open. The curtains fluttered in with a gust of wintry air, blessed with the first sweet taste of spring. The room echoed with the chorus of a thousand birds.

The old man opened his eyes. He wailed the cry of the newborn, and the salt tears of life ran down his cheeks.