

Indigo Bunting

We were getting old, my wife and me. Very old, in fact. But we still walked, early every morning. A long way, down rural streets and country roads, mostly empty. Past homes and yards and fields and fences and a stretch of woods. Then back home again. When we saw other people, which we sometimes did, we knew who they were. We'd lived here a long, long time, and we knew everyone, and everyone knew us.

My wife. Her favorite color was blue, and her favorite bird the indigo bunting. On our walks, we saw fewer and fewer. They disappeared along with her sensibilities.

She began to dread leaving the house, to fear meeting people on our walks. Their names had flown from her mind and her conversation took frightening turns.

One morning in October she told me, "I can't walk with you today. Or ever again."

But she insisted that I go, continue to walk each morning, to return and tell her all I'd seen. "Go on," she'd say. "You walk for both of us."

And each day when I returned, she asked "Did you see an indigo bunting?" And each day I told her the truth.

No. Not today.

Until the day I did.

It was feeding on the ground near a ditch, its lustrous blue shadings unmistakable. When I approached, it startled and flew over the street in the morning mist where the bumper of a speeding pickup thwacked it down. A jumble of syncopated feathers whirled in the vehicle's wake, coming to rest on the cracked center line, a tender tremble of vivid indigo.

The whine of the truck tires faded, and no other traffic appeared. As I scooped up the little bundle of life, the bunting looked at me with apparent indifference. It swiveled its head as if to get its bearings, but made no attempt to fly from my palm.

I hollowed a nest in the weeds and covered the little bird with grass, to camouflage its striking color from predators. Near the road, I marked the spot with a distinctive stone, flat on one end and rounded on the other.

My walk took me another quarter mile, where I turned around and headed for home. When I reached the stone marker, I found my makeshift nest. The indigo bunting was gone. I looked around the ditch. I listened for the song. I looked up at the phone line.

Not a bird in sight.

“Did you see an indigo bunting?”

I told her everything. That the pickup had struck the bunting. That I carried the injured bird from the road and hid it in the grass. And that when I returned, it was gone.

“Gone,” she said.

I nodded.

“A hawk found it,” she said. “Or a cat.”

“Or it took a moment to recover its wits,” I said, “and flew off to feed somewhere safer, to live happily ever after.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Without even saying thank you,” she said.

I laughed and so did she. That was the last time we laughed together.

She got worse. When I returned from my walks, she forgot to ask what I’d seen.

Just as well. Indigo buntings had vanished from my world, leaving not a tuft or feather behind.

Then she began to forget other things. She forgot her home, its rooms and its furnishings. She forgot who I was. She forgot who *she* was. I rarely walked anymore. She needed constant care. And at some point, when I knew I was a stranger to her and always would be, I realized we'd never said goodbye. The people we used to be, who had lived and loved and cried together for the better part of a century, had never said goodbye.

She died.

And I no longer wanted to walk each morning. But I heard her telling me, *Go on. Walk. You walk for both of us.*

So I walked, every day, but it meant nothing. Without her, what did anything mean? Nothing. Less than nothing.

But I walked. I walked past the site where I saw the indigo bunting. The last one I'd seen before my wife died. I thought I should feel something, but I didn't. I walked on.

At the far point in my route, I turned and headed home. Though home meant nothing to me anymore, without her there.

But I walked on.

And there was something ahead, near the road. A stone. Flat, rounded. Like the one that marked the spot where I'd covered the injured bunting. Funny I hadn't notice it before.

I crouched and looked for the nest I'd fashioned that long-ago morning, but of course after all these weeks there was nothing left.

I stood and peered along the road. Not a single vehicle. No one walking. No sign of life.

I was alone in all the world.

Only the quiet call of a songbird to keep me company.

Sweet-sweet, it seemed to say.

I looked up and there it was, perched on the telephone line. Its vivid blue putting the sky to shame.

The indigo bunting.

It called a while longer, but seemed impatient to move along, as it scanned the sky, only briefly turning a dark eye my way.

But then it held my gaze, and chirruped the final bars of its sweet sweet song. One moment it was there, calm and serene, with no trace of confusion or doubt. Then, too soon, it dashed away, darting out of sight on a tack divergent from my own.

As if to say, you won't be seeing me again.

I still wasn't used to her absence. When I got home, I was bursting with the news.

I wanted to tell her: The indigo bunting came back. Back to the exact spot where I'd rescued it.

I wanted to tell her: It came back after all, to thank me. The indigo bunting came back.

Then a thought came to my mind.

She already knows.

She knows it came back.

She knows it came back, to say thank you.

To say thank you.

And to say goodbye.