

## Failing Eyesight

"Remember that clock some one of you kids had? You know, it had a different birdsong every hour?"

"That was Jay, mum," I said, my head buried in the local newspaper, half listening. My sister-in-law had given it to my brother as a joke, but my mother had found it charming.

We sat in my mother's kitchen on an early December afternoon. I loved these moments, just the two of us, yet somehow never found enough time to visit consistently. For a little while, my mother took care of me, releasing me from my role of parent, letting me be her child again. I would tell her about her grandchildren and my classroom, and she would tell me about the latest biography she was reading. It was her favorite genre. I found these biography conversations tedious, and would try to change the subject frequently.

"Oh, yes! I loved that clock. I think Nidia gave it to him for Christmas. A different bird every hour. It's like the birds are right outside your window," my mother mused. Hardly, I thought, but if mum likes it, perhaps I should get her one for Christmas? The holiday was looming and I had no good ideas. What do you get a woman in her eighties? I wanted so much to come up with a wonderful gift for my mother, who was alone so much of the time and not visited enough by her five children. Two didn't live nearby, and of the three who did, only Ava was consistent,

taking mum shopping every week, and calling each night right after Jeopardy. I resolved to make more time, despite raising three kids and a full-time job.

"You do love birds, don't you mum?" I said, thinking of the collection of bird field guides at the cottage in Hull, while setting the newspaper aside. The family summer cottage sits at the edge of a pond, and across the street from the ocean. Identifying the birds on the pond was a topic of discussion each year. Multiple field guides had been acquired over time, and the species of egrets, swans and herons, as well as the more mundane swallows and gulls, were crosschecked in the well-thumbed pages, until agreement could be reached. It was a temporary knowledge to be relearned the following summer.

"Oh, I love watching the birds on the pond. Do you remember that grey egret? It was so unusual, the way it moved, soundlessly. I never knew there were grey egrets, or was it a heron?" she mused. "We'll have to check the bird books when we go back."

"I can never remember, mum. Personally, I love the swans, even though they can be quite aggressive. They are just so beautiful. I love that picture you painted of them."

"That was pretty good," she said smiling, remembering her oil painting class at the Senior Center.

Her eyesight, ravaged by years of glaucoma, would never allow her to paint again. I worried about the large print books becoming too hard for her to read. Mum had been an avid reader all her life. What would she do without her large print biographies?

"I don't see too many birds around here in town," she said, pushing aside the faded kitchen curtain with her spidery hands. "I do see an occasional robin or cardinal. And a lot of sparrows, and some crows, of course. It's funny, but you rarely see the bluebirds anymore, only blue jays."

"Remember our parakeet, mom? Did Mackie really live for nine years? Or is that just family legend?"

"Oh, I don't know, but it seemed like he was around forever. We wanted a songbird, but he never did anything but chirp. Now canaries, they have a beautiful song," she mused.

"Canaries?" I sat up, an idea forming.

"Yes, I remember old Mrs. Corbin had one. It would be singing away in the kitchen when I'd stop over for tea."

Our visit came to an end, and I hurried off to pick up the kids. Why had I never realized how much my mother loved birds? A canary would make the perfect gift. Since Mum's cat, Purry, had died, the little house seemed so empty. This would give her something to do, I reasoned. I remembered bringing Purry to her after my son was diagnosed as severely allergic to cats. She

loved Purry, and the cat thrived on my mother's loving attention. How hard could it be taking care of a bird? I would help when I stopped by, I thought. Perfect!

I searched all over town and beyond to find a singing canary, with no luck. The closest thing available were yellow finches. They were really small, but advertised as having a sweet song. Christmas was looming, and no other idea seemed as good as a live pet. I went with the finches. To make up for their diminutive size, I bought two. Then there was the cage, the food, the grit, and the manuals. There would be lots to occupy us during the visits. Something new to talk about besides biographies.

Christmas Day arrived. "Look what we got you, Nana!" chirped five-year-old Evelyn, leading her grandmother by the hand to the dining room table.

"Oh! What is it?" mum asked uncertainly, squinting. "Finches!" I said. "I tried to find a canary, but there weren't any anywhere. Even though they're small, they're supposed to sing."

The usual cacophony of noise erupted from the children, and if my mother had a tone of doubt in her voice, it went unheard. We set up the water and food, and read from the manual about what care would be needed. The finches' song was quite soft, an occasional chirp, but they hopped around happily. Tweety and

Flutter, named by the grandchildren, had arrived, and I had my moment of glory. They were a hit, I told myself.

The finches provided a source of entertainment for mum and her visitors. Ava and I shared cage cleaning duty. All mum had to do was water, feed, and watch Tweety and Flutter. It was the last of those things that proved challenging. My mother loved me too much to admit to any trouble seeing the birds.

One chilly, February day I stopped by to visit. I hadn't been by in a while, and I felt the need of her uncomplicated love. After a tough day in the classroom, my spirits lifted, anticipating a nice cozy visit.

"Hi Mum!" I smiled, as she opened the door to my knock. I had looked forward to seeing the happy surprise on my mother's face when she opened the door, but the usual delight wasn't there.

"Oh, Tori," she said softly, with a look of shame on her face, "I should have called one of you kids to come help, but I felt so stupid."

The story unfolded as we stood uneasily by the cage in the dining room, with one little yellow bird hopping nervously on its perch. The day's routine had begun as usual, with mum cooing at her feathered friends, then adding a bit of food to the tiny feeder. The water needed changing, so she reached in shakily and grabbed the small container, then headed off to the kitchen to

refill the water. While there, she filled the kettle and dropped her *When Pigs Fly* bread into the toaster. She mused about how filling the bread was, full of whole grains, nuts and seeds. The kids would be mad when she admitted she only had a slice of toast for breakfast. Ava, her oldest, said she should have an egg at least three times a week, but that seemed like so much. Which reminded her that the Ensure was all gone. Well, it wouldn't be too much for Ava to carry from the grocery store, she thought, now that Purry was gone, and they didn't need to get the cat food cans. Now she had these little birds- oh! The water! She headed back to the dining room with the water, and saw a flash of yellow fly by. Her old eyes were unsure of what she just saw, so she went back to check the cage. There was the door, wide open. There was Tweety. Or Flutter. But only one of them. The other was flying around the dining room. She couldn't believe she had left the cage door open. "Oh, Lordy!", she muttered. Quickly closing the cage door, she looked around for some way to catch the bird, which was now flying at the window as if to escape. The kids would think she couldn't handle the simplest thing. "Foolish!" she said out loud. Looking round frantically for the little bird, she saw it perched on the windowsill. She had the idea of containing the finch somehow, and searched the kitchen pantry for a suitable object. The colander seemed right, but if she trapped it against the window,

it would need to be covered with something. She spied a sturdy cardboard advertisement amongst the mail, and snatched it up. This would work just fine for the cover.

In retelling the story, mum demonstrated how she covered the bird at the window, then slid the cardboard between window and colander, creating a closed container.

"He was jumping around, chirping, pushing up against the cardboard. I got so nervous!" Exhausted, she put the colander down on the dining room table, and placed a book on top. She sat heavily, and fretted about how to get the bird back in the cage. Should she call Ava, or maybe Jonah? No, that would be worse. Ava does so much, she thought, and Jonah and Tori must be at work. She could do this, she thought determinedly. Opening the cage door once again, she lifted the colander and attempted to tip it against the cage and slide off the cardboard. The fluttering of wings and loud chirp startled her. She jumped back with a yelp, and away flew the finch. Shakily, she slammed the cage door once again, and went out to the kitchen to rest, have her now-cold toast, and gather her wits about her.

Perhaps a quick grab would be best, she thought, but she couldn't do that barehanded. She spied the worn oven mitt lying against the old stove. She slipped it on and walked slowly back to the dining room window where little Flutter or Tweety sat trembling on the window sash. Gathering her courage, she quickly

grasped the little body tightly so it couldn't get away. She opened the cage door, and deposited the bird within, then fiercely shut the cage door. Breathing heavily, she stepped away from the cage, and sat again, feeling slightly lightheaded. As her cloudy eyes gazed at the cage, she saw one little yellow body on the perch, and there, on the bottom of the cage, laid the other.

"Oh, Mum. I am so sorry." My eyes filled with tears.

"Where is the bird now, Mum?" I asked softly.

"It's wrapped in tissue, and out on the dryer in the back hall. Do you think you could bury it out back?"

"Sure, Mum," I said, my own guilt mixed with sadness. I picked up the tiny parcel, grabbed a trowel from the back hall and headed out to the back yard. Once I got there I realized this task would be impossible as the ground was frozen. I just couldn't go back into the house with the dead bird. I found some old bricks and built a little mausoleum.

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The next time I was in my mother's house was to clean it out, in preparation for the realtor. She had been hospitalized shortly after the bird episode, and from there things went downhill quickly. Glancing out the window, I saw my mother's



roses. Regretting that no one was appreciating them, I decided to cut a few to bring home. As I headed back into the house, my eyes fell on the cluster of bricks. How much had changed since I had formed them into that little mausoleum. I moved the bricks, but there wasn't a trace of the little yellow finch. There would not be another burial.

The following spring I was determined to open the cottage again. It was a beautiful April day, and a week's vacation lay ahead. The cottage embraced me as I pushed open the swollen door. I took a deep breath. Home. I half expected my mother to come walking out to greet me from the tiny kitchen, so strong was the feeling of her presence.

As I began the sweeping, washing, and dusting I noticed the bird books piled up on the sideboard. Just then, I heard a soft chirping. Two barn swallows were setting up residence on the back porch. Back and forth they flew, chirping and fluttering in an agitated way that seemed to signal their awareness of human company. Soon there would be baby birds. New life, new summer season.

I thought of the two little finches, one squeezed to death with loving hands, the other simply found lying still on the bottom of the cage a few months later.

After a fruitful morning of cleaning, I made a cup of tea, and settled on the sunny porch to await the arrival of the gas

and water meter readers, while the new winged family shared their space reluctantly. I thought about my mother's love of birds and biographies, and picked up the field guide. I wondered who this Petersen guy was, and why he loved birds so much. Perhaps I'd look for his biography.