

Perched

The feeder—a cylinder of glass with an overhanging roof and circular tray painted a bright cobalt—hung below the awning on the back porch, visible from the kitchen window. She gripped the edge of one side of the double sink and he gripped the edge of the other side while they watched.

“Well,” he said, “they found the feeder.”

“Just watch them,” she said.

“They’re eating,” he said. “Isn’t that why we hung it?”

“They won’t share,” she said. “Look. Why is that one hanging on the cord waiting for that one to leave when there’s all that room?”

“They’re taking turns,” he said, leaning close to her ear as though he was going to kiss her. She pulled her shoulders towards her ears, and he turned instead and went back to the other room. She heard the recliner open and paper rustle. Probably one of the five newspapers he’d taken to reading. The same stories, over and over.

She climbed on the counter, balancing on the edge with her bare feet in the sink, knees to her chest. “They’re not taking turns,” she said. “They’re only pretending.”

“What?”

“Pretending,” she yelled. “See, this one just swooped down and chased the other one away.”

He was silent.

She scooted so she was more secure on her perch, and the toes of her right foot found the small pool of water that collected beside the drain. She wiggled her toes in it, swished the water around, pressed against the stainless steel and flattened noodles from the ramen she’d dumped

earlier. It felt like tightening her fist around new playdough until it escaped from between her fingers.

“Now they’re doing fly-bys,” she said.

“Did you just say *fly-bys*?”

“Yeah. You know, like drive-bys?”

“So chickadees are flying by our kitchen window with guns?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

“Just come here and watch them.”

“Okay.”

She sighed—loud enough for him to hear her all the way in the other room.

“One will be sitting on the feeder, then another will fly by and chase it off, then another will land only to be chased off by another,” she said. “So now, not only are they not sharing, but nobody’s gaining anything. They’re just like the girls.”

The words unsettled her, and she ground her heel into the drain and more ramen.

The recliner pushed shut and she heard him stop in the doorway. “They’re just like what?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “It doesn’t matter.”

He stayed in the doorway, creaking on the threshold, while she stared at the now empty feeder, still swaying from the last bird that pushed off.

She continued to stare at the chickadees, determined to not turn around, to make it clear that she wouldn’t, and eventually he went back to his chair. They certainly were funny birds, with the ways they approached the feeder. Sometimes, when one bird was eating, another would

glide in and instead of landing on the feeder or grasping the feeder's hanger, it would clutch the edge of the awning and hang upside down, watching the other bird. She wondered about the angle of its neck as it contorted. It didn't look comfortable or right or natural. Why could the bird do it—why was the chickadee special?

It let go and did a rolling dive at the other bird, chasing it away and taking its place.

“Why do they hang upside-down?” she asked.

“They're chickadees,” he said.

“It can't be comfortable,” she said. “And what does it matter that they're chickadees? Don't all birds do that?”

This time, she heard him sigh from the other room. “It just does. They're weird. They like to play. And if you already knew, why did you ask?”

“But they look more like they're fighting.”

The phone started ringing in the other room.

“Don't answer it,” she said.

“We have to answer it,” he said. “Hello . . . hi.”

His voice faded away, probably taking the phone into the den, farther away from the kitchen. Ten different birds had fought over the food before she heard him come into the kitchen, receiver in hand.

“It's my mom,” he said. “Cecelia has started to ask for us and she was wondering if we're—if you're—ready yet. If she can bring her home.”

“Maybe they are just playing,” she said. “I guess they could be playing and not mean anything by it.”

“Mom wants to know when she can bring our daughter home,” he said.

A moment passed where the only sound was a squealing laughter coming through the crackling receiver.

And then small puffs of air from his shoes as he shifted his weight from side to side.

“You know—if you’re ready.”

“Maybe we should get special seed. Chickadee mix.”

“I’ll call you back,” he said. “Love you, too.”

“Why are you sitting in the sink?” he asked after hanging up.

“I’m not in the sink. I’m on the counter.”

He was silent, though she could hear him dragging his feet over the linoleum. Eventually, she heard the kitchen door open and shut, and he soon appeared within the world framed by the window; he wouldn’t make eye contact with her while he reached up and lifted the feeder off its nail and took it to the shed on the other side of the wild yard.

There was only the yard and him in the bird feeder’s absence. The grass brushed against his shins as he crossed the yard, and he tripped once or twice over submerged toys. Balls, sand pails, play sets—things she could only find by the bright primary colors and pinks and purples. He smacked the feeder against the handle of the toy lawn mower and gave a wide berth to the scooter. Cecelia wasn’t big enough to ride the scooter yet. Even when Cecelia could, she probably wouldn’t let her for awhile. Ever. The toys should be picked up, put away, stored. He tripped over another hidden primary color and finally stumbled into the shed. Somebody should do that. And somebody should mow the lawn.

He was in the shed for a long time. She had nothing to count moments by, without the chickadees, but it felt like a long time. Her foot in the puddle was getting cold.

When he came out of the shed, he looked towards the window as he crossed the yard—towards her. He wouldn't be able to find her through the sun's glare, though. She could watch him but all he would see was himself.

He stopped in front of the window and was still for a few moments. Eight birds worth, at least.

"I want Cecelia home," he said. "It's time."

His voice was muffled, but she could hear him just fine. She looked out to the edges of the yard and the thick, full maples. He blurred at the edge of her vision, faded. Their leaves would change soon, fall. The yard needed to be in order by then. She should pick up the toys.

"You should mow the yard," she said.

He looked down and she knew he could hear her, too.

"You need to move—do something. Take a shower."

"It hurts too much," she said. "I need more time."

He came back into the kitchen and didn't look at her before going back to the other room. The recliner opened—and shut. Opened, then shut. Opened.

She started scooping the discarded ramen from the drain, picking the noodles out with her left hand and squashing them into her right. She picked up every noodle, including those that were halfway down the drain or flattened across the grate. She held the soggy mass in her hand, bouncing her arm up and down a few times and trying to feel it as a weight. But it was just ramen. She pivoted at the waist and hurled the noodles in the general direction of the trash can.

She ran the tap and grabbed the washcloth and scrubbed the ramen residue from her foot, working extra hard on her heel. It was scratched and raw from the drain, and she was just making it worse.

She dropped the washcloth and ran her fingers along her toes; she rubbed at the chipped polish on her nails. It was bright—a neon green. The kind of color a child would pick. A chartreuse. She didn't even know why she knew that word.

She rubbed harder, then tried to flick the polish off by getting under the edge of a chip with her thumbnail. It didn't work very well because her fingernails were chewed down to the quick.

Half jumping, half falling off the counter, she tripped to the silverware drawer and yanked it open, the contents slamming against the front of the drawer and each other when the catch prevented her from flinging it across the room. She pushed forks and butter knives and steak knives aside until she found her small paring knife; she squeezed the small metal handle in her hand—it felt like the stainless steel had felt against her foot. Cold metal against cold skin.

“Hey,” he said. “Everything okay in there?”

She mumbled something she couldn't even understand and plopped down on the linoleum and began scraping at the polish with the knife. It vibrated her toes and made a sound that made her feel like she was hearing with her toes and not her ears, made her feel like she had no control, but she kept flicking off chips of green. She was moving much too erratically to have any precision, and soon the cuticles and skin around her smaller toes were punctured, sliced, and bleeding. But still she scraped.

The big toe on her right foot wouldn't come clean, so she started using the point of the knife. She scraped and dug and scratched until grooves formed. She dug until she felt a pop and yelped at the sudden pain; it took her a moment to realize the point of the knife had pierced through the nail.

He ran in the room at the cry and looked at her on the floor, neon green paint chips and droplets of blood around her feet. Crossing his legs, he dropped down in front of her and took the knife, sliding it across the floor behind him.

“I think you sat in some noodles,” she said.

“It’s okay,” he said.

He looked at her, waiting, but she just put her chin on her knees. He got up and left the kitchen, returning with cotton balls and peroxide. He swiped the flattened ramen to the side with his foot and kneeled in front of her feet; she kept her chin on her knees as he ran moist cotton balls across her toes.

“I can hang it back up,” he said when he was finished.

She used the counter to pull herself to her feet. “No,” she said. “No, it’s okay.”

He nodded and left the kitchen and she looked back out the window, noticing that the chickadees were still fluttering around the awning, looking for the feeder.