

Great Bird

(2005)

“Toss in some sunflowers and millet and make sure there’s water.” Jonathan hands me the black wire cage, the olive canary flitting from perch to side, the sun bright on the street where we agreed to meet. “Give ’em a piece of lettuce or whatever you’re cooking. He likes that.” I want to kiss Jonathan even though there are beads of sweat on his upper lip, I’m not attracted to him, I’m married, and my girls are hovering around the cage. What is it about recently divorced men that makes me want to gather them to my breast and reassure them that their worst fear of themselves isn’t the only truth?

The metal handle digs into my palm as I watch Jonathan walk to the car. *I’m sorry for your loss. It’ll be okay. Maybe even better.* His body language and brusque tone chuffs off any talk of the personal, of the flames around

him. Reach for him and you’ll burn. “Oh yeah,” he turns. “Ozzy likes flyin’ around the house but don’t let him outside. He’ll never make it.”

“I’ll take good care of your bird Jonathan.” Buckling the girls in their car seats, I adjust the cage between them and start the seventy mile drive back to our place in the country, mulling over this affinity for divorced men. When I was eight, Mom divorced Dad and he moved across town into a dingy apartment and got depressed. Before we would go over to see him, Mom would say, “Cheer up your dad. Put some art on the walls. Help him make dinner.” The thought is a flare lighting up the dark hall of memory.

I glance in the mirror at the girls watching Ozzy bob like a castaway on a lifeboat.

“Did I ever tell you about when my little brother was seven and he crocheted our dad an afghan out of red and black yarn?”

“What is crochet?” Audrey, four, asks.

“A kind of knitting. J.D. wanted it big enough to cover our Dad. He worked on it for two years and gave it to Dad the second Christmas. We took turns cuddling up in it on the couch.”

“Mom can we hold the birdie?” asks Franny, two and a half, who has her finger on the cage, her blue eyes intent on the bird’s frantic movements. Audrey’s brown

eyes are watching me watch Franny.

“It would make her—I mean him—too nervous.”

“Well what can we do with him?”

Pull over and deposit him on the curb. “We can find our own name for him.”

“What’s wrong with Ozzy?” says Audrey. “I like the name.”

“Ozzy is named after the rock singer Ozzy Osbourne. When he was on stage he would bite the heads off of canaries and spit them out.”

Their eyes widen and stare at me to make sure I’m not joking. “That’s mean,” Audrey says.

We settle on Goldie, even though the bird is not canary yellow, but a drab olive with a bright tuft of gold. As tall buildings and strip malls morph into housing developments and flat squares of farmland, the buzzing steps up in my head. What was I thinking of, taking this bird? I am entranced by ideas. The idea is so shiny and full of promise. The idea of the bird sounded so good and then there’s bird crap and feeding and lurking death. This is how I live my life. Somehow I manage to hold down a full-time job, stay married ten years, raise my kids, tend to a house in the country, and live in a community with three other families—all good ideas I chose—but the living out of these ideas makes me feel weak-hearted in the world. When I’m drying dishes and staring out at the

dark field, Dylan’s line surfaces, “Vaguely sensing she’s caught.” I’m thinking someone should give me a medal, a ribbon even, for staying put, for holding a life together.



“He looks like a sparrow,” my husband Jeff proclaims as he props up the large cage in the living room. He means a House Sparrow and this is the lowest thing you could say about a bird in our community. For nine years now, we have all lived on a hundred acres in the country along the Rum River, and we’ve seen how House Sparrows take over native song birds’ nesting sites. Jeff’s brother Brett and his wife Diane (M.S. specializing in ornithology) have a trap that catches House Sparrows. At my feeders on the days when there are only House Sparrows I think why am I feeding the CEOs of Wal-Mart and Halliburton?

We prop up the cage door and wait. All morning Goldie is silent, but by the afternoon his beautiful trills fill up our vaulted room. It pleases me that the bird matches our olive and wheat painted walls. We carry his cage out to the porch and he flies from screen to screen then lands on top of the cage and stays there for a long time, until we leave him alone and when we walk in again he’s settled back in and life feels fine.

In the living room, Goldie hops from the hutch to the couch, flies to the sink and pecks on the formica. I call our beagle Sadie over and pet her soft brown ears as she watches Goldie hop along the floor. I explain this is an Inside Bird and part of our clan now and she can't eat it or paw it. Sadie's lids around her brown eyes make her look like she has eyeliner on and she gives me a withering gaze that reminds me of my Italian grandmother: *You're kidding. First babies, now this.* She retreats to her bed in protest.

The kids in the community come to check out the bird. Along with our two, there are seven. Eight-year-old Miles (Alpha male of the clan), studies Goldie with his intent blue eyes. "I think it's cool you have a bird in the house. It's like bringing nature inside. Did you know that peregrine falcons can fly vertically as fast as two hundred miles per hour?" Miles may one day be our president or design a car that runs on sound. His little sister Olivia sings a song to Goldie, then says, "I think she's lonely."

The thought drops into my head like a parachuter releasing her balloon. This is a bird that lost his bird-father three years ago, lost his female caregiver when the marriage devolved, and just lost Jonathan. Is he lonely? I worry that my little Franny is left out of the older kids' games, that my husband is lonely even in community, and now my worry-lasso has caught this bird.

"Do you think Goldie is lonely?" I ask Jeff, who's washing radishes, his calves big like Belgian horses, dusted with dirt from the garden.

"Birds don't have emotions."

"But we really don't know whether it's lonely. Birds are not like dogs. They are wholly other; I have no sense of his internal life."

Jeff hands me a plump radish. Though I won't eat it, I like the heft of it in my hand, the radiance of the red skin contrasting with black flecks of dirt. "Bird brain, remember? He doesn't have an internal life. Let's worry about what we're going to have for dinner. That bird's got it great here. Bet he didn't fly much at Jonathan's."

Brett wanders over from the farmhouse we all shared nine years ago, and squints in the cage. "He looks like a sparrow." For Brett's insult I hand him a can of Grain Belt Beer instead of a Summit. I show him the picture in the canary book of how Goldie actually looks like his wild forbears, olive, with a mustard yellow sheen. "It's not an insult," he adds. "I like sparrows. Just not House Sparrows."

The next day I leave Audrey and her cousin Leif, six, in the house while I run next door, warning them, "Do not go on the porch, Do not open the cage, Do not touch the bird." Leif has spiky white-blond hair and blue eyes and is a great kid who now and again can look like a

cherub while he lies through his teeth; Audrey is a first-born rule keeper and rarely disobeys me. A few minutes later, from my neighbor Cyndy's yard, I glance over to see the kids in the porch, see the dark shape of the bird in the air. I run back to find Goldie lying on the cage floor, convulsing, his claws curled up, Leif standing next to him. I double over in automatic weeping, turn Goldie on his stomach where he lies splayed, heartbeat spasming his little body. I shove Leif on the couch and Audrey on the chair and both start crying loud and hard.

"What did you do?" I put my finger in Leif's face. "You killed him. You killed my bird. Why didn't you listen to me?" Leif and Audrey have never seen me like this.

Leif's face is bright red as he wails, "I didn't hear you!" Which makes me more furious.

"You killed my bird. And now you're lying to me."

"I didn't mean to!"

Audrey weeps, holds out her arms to me.

"You stay here." As I run over to Cyndy's I imagine telling Jonathan I killed his bird after only two days, which makes me cry harder. Cyndy comes back and comforts the kids and cups Goldie in her hands and strokes him, saying calmly, "I think he'll make it."

It turns out Leif had seen a TV show where a trainer released a falcon, so he decided to try it. The first time went great—he tossed Goldie up and he flew around the

porch. The second toss was too hard and Goldie hit the ceiling and dropped to the floor.

The rest of the day Goldie stands on his perch, breathing fast and shallow, eyes bright, the essence of fear. The air is filled with terror now. I lie awake and picture Goldie slamming against the ceiling. I think about how, when you let something fly, you release it into danger (a plane, a marriage, a child, your words, your love for someone). And how Leif will now think I am the witchiest woman in community. Medusa, the Cruella de Ville of the Compound. He will always look at me with a bit of fear.

"The mind rushes on, a drunk elephant" says Kabir. I look over and watch Jeff who, like a soldier, sleeps instantly and deeply when and where he can. The irony is that I, an insomniac, would marry the world's best sleeper. He is America and I am Haiti and night after night I look over hungrily. I have P.M.S. and it is three in the morning and the world is a model airplane I must assemble in the dark, without instructions. I am holding the universe together with the glue of my worry. I toss and turn on our new king size bed, which I thought would be the Shangri-La of my sleep problems, only I read an article about off-gassing from beds made of synthetic materials and since we've gotten it I've woken up with puffy eyes and wheezing breath, and in this moment, the bed seems like a toxic island, like a cancer

machine, like—

“Honey,” I nudge him, “Jeff.”

“Huh. Which kid’s awake.”

“I’m sorry. I’m freaking out. I think this bed is going to give us cancer. And I saw this mother being really mean to her kids in the grocery store, and it got me thinking about kids and abuse and why do we live out here and how Audrey’s going to end up pregnant by a four-wheeling, tobacco-chewing, camo-wearing, gun-toting emotionally frozen son. I want to get rid of Goldie, sell the cars, why did we build such a big house? And we’re committed to the community and have no exit plan. How can we sell even if we wanted to move? We used to live in a VW Van for God’s sake, now look at us. We both have to work full time, we’re tired and grouchy and—”

“Here,” Jeff holds out his hand. His large Swedish face looks moonish at night.

“What.”

“It’s a ‘Get Out Of Your Brain Free’ card. Take it.”

I giggle. He’s never thought of that before.

“Come here.” I lean into his broad warm body and he puts his strong arms around me. “It’ll be alright. We can’t leave right now. Give into that. But if you really, really keep wanting to leave, we’ll find a way.” I find my breathing with his and start to feel my brain recede like a

tide. “Look,” he adds. “I’ve woken up kinda wheezy too, but it’ll pass. We’ll open up the windows and let the bed air out . . . Hey, now that we’re awake do you wanna have sex?”



In the morning I call Leif and apologize for yelling. Later, a note appears in my mailbox in spidery boy writing. “Sorry I hurt yer bird. And din’t lisen to you. Leif.” He drew a rather good likeness of Goldie. Leif rides over on his bike and plays with the girls like nothing ever happened.

Another day passes before Goldie hops to the hutch, flutters to the couch, and flies back to the top of the cage. His song finds us in the house; I watch Jeff watching the bird, listening.



The afternoon sun shines in as I sit cross-legged in the green Lazy Boy grading papers a few feet away from Goldie. When he sings I can see his whole body working to make those complicated trills. One layer of melody is like a teeny Pavarotti, and below that are Africans singing three different sounds simultaneously. Time stops

and it is an exquisite pleasure to be so close to his pulsating throat, his shiny eye, his song. Every time the phone rings he starts up again. I want people to call just to make him sing, but after a while Jeff is hollering, “Shut up already!” God gives us paradise and we tire of the vivid blues, the intense greens, the buzzing of cicadas.

On the Greensprings in the mountains of Oregon, when I was in my early twenties, I would visit my theology professor in his old wood house. John would be slouched on the couch, his black knit cap over his flaking hair, talking about something like the Hebrew word *nefesh* in the book of Genesis, translated variously as God’s throat, the place where life begins, the breath that animals and humans share, what animates us. *Nefesh* is also used to refer to the living creatures before humans. When God shapes the dust and breathes into it, it too becomes alive. The TV would be on, John’s wife Nancy would move in and out of the room, pausing to add her insights, flipping her long black hair, smiling at me, handing me a slice of warm bread, their two daughters rolling toys in, drawing me pictures, their Sheltie yapping every time someone in their community walked by. And all the while, Nancy’s lovebirds would be flying through the house, from bookshelf to plant—a hurtling yellow, a blue flutter of wings—and I would feel known in this chaos. Fifteen years later I have created my own

rendition of that lovely chaos.

“Get that bird outta here!” Jeff hollers from the kitchen, swinging at the bird. “We’re all gonna die of encephalitis.” Goldie dive bombs Jeff especially, grazing his ear, and then he lights on the top of our kitchen cupboards and cocks his head and peers down at Jeff. A blur of wings and rapid chirping then Goldie settles into his cage.

Audrey slides down the cage door. “Even though Dad is yelling at the bird he still likes Goldie.”

“I do not.”

“Yes you do Dad. You love Goldie.” Audrey the first-born, narrating the unwritten script for our family roles.

“Birds belong outside.” Jeff flips the burgers and lifts the lid to the steaming broccoli.

“She would die outside Jonathan said.”

“He,” Audrey corrects me.

“Good.” Jeff cuts a thick slice of his warm oatmeal-wheat bread, and spreads more butter than I would let myself, and hands it to me.



Months slide by. Our life with Goldie takes on a rhythm. I open the cage door and let him fly whenever I’m around. We have a giant moose antler Jeff found in the North

woods, propped up on top of the kitchen cupboards and Goldie loves to perch on it, like it's the tallest tree branch in his terrain. He hops around on the kitchen island while the girls color, cocks his head at me, and chirps like he's narrating our lives, and I remember that I had a robin for a pet. We called it Robbie and Mom let us take it in the car all the way from Ohio to Tennessee where she had scored a free getaway for her and us four kids. Robbie sat on my lap in the backseat in a styrofoam to-go box, and we would let it hop around at rest stops. We had that bird until it died in the garage, most likely from asphyxiation. Mom found it in the morning when she was getting in the car to go to work, and she cried. The only time Mom ever cried was when she watched *Born Free* or a pet died.

One day I am sitting in the living room and Goldie is hopping across the floor and Sadie leaps up and pounces, like some ancient hunting instinct resurrected itself before her brain woke up. She lifts a paw and —

“No,” I holler and grab her collar and put her in the down position and immediately she is ashamed. Goldie hops over as I'm rubbing Sadie's stomach, and I am thinking how much I just like Sadie, how she's been with me from the start of our marriage, and how I can tell what she's feeling all the time, which is comforting to me. This bird is an enigma.

Sometimes when I prop the cage door up and press it against the cage to secure it, the door slams back down. Goldie jumps away in time, taken aback. I rush over and open it more carefully. Other times the kids will be jumping so hard it shuts the cage door when he's out and then he can't get back in. I make a mental note to put a latch on the door in order to keep it open

“That's it. It's the bird or me.” Jeff is standing on a chair peering over the top of our cupboards. He's a big Swede so he looks like a giant. I get up there and understand why he is making that gagging sound like he's going to heave. The top of the cupboards is splattered with birdcrap. It looks like Central Park after an old lady tossed out bread crumbs. It is revolting, perched right there above our food-lives. “That bird has got to fly less.” I grab soapy water and a sponge and somehow the gluey texture of the poop and the rough pressboard makes it impossible to clean. I climb down and still it hovers there.

At five thirty in the morning I haven't even turned the coffeepot on and the bird starts chirping. Goldie will not stop until I put in some seed and prop open the cage door. And even then he has to talk to me like we're two old people swapping accounts of how bad we slept (I woke up thirteen times. My back is killing me. Chirp-chirp). I come home after teaching at the university—one-and-

a-half to two hours in commute—and walk through the door to the dog wagging her tail with a stuffed animal in her mouth, the bird chirping madly, scuttling back and forth on the poop-filled newspaper because of course Jeff never let her out, the girls both needing me, and Jeff asking logistical questions about bills and dinner and did I remember cream and—. It makes me understand the old farmwife mentality of “one more mouth to feed.” It all comes down to feeding, clothing, and excrement. I decide I’m gonna give that bird up. I write the ad in my head:

Needs home: Canary that looks like a sparrow. Must fly every day. Sings like Callas, shits like a newborn.

One day Miles and Olivia’s cat got in the house. Jingles is a sleek black panther freed of any social constraints. He lunges at your legs and climbs up curtains and moves like a stud, looking for a new lay. The kids were running in and out of the downstairs back door, and the cat must have slipped in. All I know is I’m sitting on the living room carpet and this black cat struts by licking his lips, like in the cartoons, and I look up at the empty bird cage, door propped open, and think there’s that then. I walk through the house yodeling, “Goldie. Yoo-hoo. Goldie-bird.” Six kids are running around and I tell them the first one to find the bird gets a quarter. Goldie! Goldie!

No sign of him, but neither of carnage—there would be feathers and bones. I am noticing, next to sadness, a pint of relief. It would be nice to be free of this little shitter. It would be one less thing to clean up after and to annoy Jeff and—“Found him!” Leif holds up his palm for the quarter; Goldie is downstairs tucked up in the ductwork, hiding from the chaos of the kids.



It is late winter in Minnesota. The house is closing in on me. I am weary of rising above: rising above the desire to lay down in the middle of the day, to have a drink in one hand and the remote in the other, of wanting to play with my friends, to do one thing, just one thing at a time, whether it’s read to Franny or watch Audrey’s gymnastics or listen to Jeff’s account of his day or pet Sadie, but not all of these at once, please.

I am washing out the green plastic compost bucket which I had hurled out the front door and left for a month in protest of winter. The hot water has warmed the frozen food and the odor makes me swoon. I put a new charcoal filter in the lid, and scatter some baking soda on the bottom. Jeff comes in from feeding the chickens and I announce proudly that the compost is back in action.

“Until it sits out in the snow for another two months.”

On another day I would have giggled, but at this moment in my mind I hiss, “I hate you.” It’s not personal. It is the ongoing cold war that marriage becomes. The thousand details that nickel and dime away the dowry of our love. The constant barrage of needs from two young children, two cars, two jobs, a house, a community, so that we have no buoyancy, so that when I need him to say, “You’re doing a great job honey,” and instead he says, “Why do you have to pile everything on the counter right where I need to roll out the dough,” or I want him to tell me, “You’re a good mother,” and what comes out of his mouth is, “The kids never learn consequences. You don’t make them clean up.” And when his back is spasming, the dead last thing I want to do is to stop my spinning (folding up clothes, shaking out dog-hair rugs, grading sixty-five papers), and give him a massage. And I know, by the look he gives me, that he hates me too in the moment, though the entirety of his life will not allow him to admit such a feeling. And I know that this is going on in homes across America—good loving people—my neighbors included. I have seen couples in Target where the wife is holding out a purchase and talking to her husband in a clipped, overly polite way, as if he were a client she loathed but whose business she needed

to keep, and the husband is looking away from her, his words escaping from a closed mouth, his face a mask of the cold war.

A veteran of his childhood, Jeff emerges at times judgmental and defensive. I say something and he bites back in a way that alerts me that he has confused me with his mother or his father. In response I become an unattractive blend of castrating and victimish, and he becomes the source of all of my unhappiness. I talk to him through gritted teeth, he pounds out of the room. One time we were in the car tussling about who should go in and return some movies. I stayed in the car while he stormed in. Audrey asks, “Mom, are you mad at Dad?” Yes. “Why did you marry him if you don’t like him?”



A few days later, Franny and the neighbor Louis are playing, and it is getting close to when I drive them to preschool. I open the cage door to give Goldie a chance for a brief spin, walk away, hear the door slam, and turn to see Goldie flailing. The door, now a guillotine, seems to have broken her back. I rush over, cup the bird in my hands, knowing she’s a goner. “I killed my bird. I killed my bird,” I moan over and over. I sit on the green Lazy Boy as two three-year-olds hover around. Louis reassures

me that Goldie is sleepy and I should put him back in the cage. Franny pets him gently as we watch Goldie go from struggle to relent, watch the natural forces taking over, his shiny dot of an eye closing, closing. I feel his heat move into my hands. Franny holds my arm. I wish I could stop crying. When he is dead I call my neighbor and sister-in-law Diane, whom I always call for bird troubles (hummingbird trapped in garage, bluebird diving into window). She puts Goldie in a shoebox on the porch and helps me buckle the kids in the car.

As I drive, I keep glancing at Franny in the rearview mirror. She is smiling and talking to Louis and doesn't seem affected. After I drop them off I wander around the small town of Princeton feeling deranged (me an environmentalist animal lover, causing the death of a bird). I drift into the balloon shop for Audrey's upcoming birthday party, and blurt out to the lady that my bird just died. She looks away and I feel like some prattling hormonally challenged woman, then she says, "Well, so are you thinking of a kind of ceremony, so something in black perhaps?" I laugh no, explain about Audrey's party. "Well if you do have a ceremony, you could let a balloon go to help the kids understand about death. And the latex isn't a problem for birds; they aren't interested in biting it. It's the string that's troublesome, so you could cut it right before you let the balloon go." I walk

out with two gold helium balloons.

When Audrey and Cedar and Olivia come home from school, Franny and I break the news and hug Audrey as her little face crumples up. She cries hard, then opens the shoebox and the girls take turns holding Goldie. They pry open his eyelids, tug on the claws, extend the wings, and pet him boldly. They do in death what they couldn't in life. We talk about souls and heaven. I explain how Goldie's body is here, but his spirit is somewhere else. This is their first glimpse at death and this paradox seems clunky and unsatisfying, but the girls accept it with the easy grace that only children can. Cedar says, "Maybe the balloon knows where Goldie's spirit is, and so wherever the balloon goes, there goes Goldie."

Brett stops over with two Grain Belts. No one blames me for the bird because I don't need any help putting on that crown of thorns. When Jeff gets home he digs a hole in the still-frozen front yard. Our family gathers around the hole with the shoebox and the balloons. We say a prayer and tell Goldie we love him. I cut the strings and we watch the gold balloons drifting in circles up into the grey sky. I am surprised when Franny says she wants to be the one to put Goldie in the hole. She takes him out of the box, stares at his little body, then the dark soil, then puts him in and starts crying. Good-bye great bird.

We head in. The empty cage looms in the corner. Jeff

heats up leftover turkey, and I am relieved the girls don't make the connection. He hands Franny and Audrey their first wishbone, which he had been drying on the sill. "Now make a wish and pull and your wish will come true." Audrey gets the larger piece.

"What was your wish Franny?"

She looks small in her too-tight favorite red velvet pants and cowgirl boots, holding the short end of the bone. "I wished God and Jesus and Mary and their donkey Whisper would sit at our table and eat dinner with us." Her blue eyes are trained on Jeff. "You were wrong. My wish didn't come true. God's not here."

Jeff and I look at each other. He says, "Maybe one day your wish will come true."

"Some people say God is here right now," I add.

"But I want to see him," Franny insists.

"Maybe God is a she." As we eat turkey we all chime in on whether God is a he or a she or a he-she, or perhaps a tiger. As we are clearing the dishes, the energy turns and Jeff and I start in. I say something hard and he retreats to the bedroom. Franny looks up from her coloring. "You can't get mad at God."

"Do you think God looks like Jeff?"

"Yes, only skinny."

"Should we draw God so you can show me?"

Jeff comes back in and we take a break from the cold

war and sit around the table, drawing pictures of God. Franny draws him in brown crayon with long hair and holding his arms out, surrounded by a rainbow and blue people flying all around him. "He's thinking of us," she says. "He's using his imagination. This is Cedar holding Goldie dead, and in her other hand she's holding a dead goldfinch; that's why the bird is dark, cuz he was laying down in the dirt. Cedar's starting a bird collection and she's going to give them to God."

The cold war is not what surprises me anymore. It is that love keeps finding us. That Fortuna's wheel circles away from hatred or disdain back to ease and intimacy. I remember my professor John talking about how sometimes the status quo can be a sign of grace. Back then, when I had no desire for a normal life, that idea lodged in my mind, and it finds me now that I have become, in many ways, the status quo. Love finds me here.