

Amends '82: Part Two

by Ginnah Howard

Bobby took one out and looked at the date. "July 1965. Does that mean anything to you, Ma? Carla, T.J.?" Bobby handed the paper to my mother. "Why don't you spread it out on the counter to see if you can find something that he might have wanted to keep a record of, something about one of us or about him. How old were you, Carla, in 1965?"

"I know that exactly," I said. "July of '65 was when Vicky and me ran away. I was fifteen. Good lord, fifteen. Seventeen years ago."

"I must have been thirteen," T.J. said, "and Bobby, you were fourteen."

Bobby laughed. "Look under the arrests section. I was in and out jail along about that time. It'll say name withheld because of age."

My mother was busy running her finger up and down the columns while Bobby slowly lifted out another few layers of paper. Below a few inches, he came upon wads of paper. He picked one up and squeezed. Then he picked up another and did the same. "What the hell?"

He pawed down through the wads, squeezing here and there. He laughed again. "All right. Each of us is going to reach in and take out one wad and then wait until everybody has one before you squeeze it."

Each of us felt around for a second before making our selection. It was like those grab bag things we used to do in school at Christmas when the teacher wanted to make sure that nobody got left out and that nobody got anything better than anyone else^¾which of course pretty much meant everyone got something lousy like a box of crayons or a cheesy coloring book or an icky plastic top that wouldn't spin. We all stepped back from the box, squeezing.

"I haven't got a clue. Not a clue," I said.

"Me either," T.J. said.

"Clueless," Bobby said. "Ma?"

"Not a single idea," she answered.

"Okay, go," Bobby told us.

Slowly we began to unwrap. Deep inside the wad, nestled within at least five sheets of paper—a bird...a carved bird. My fingers uncovered its wings. A hot ball of rage boiled up in my chest. My arm drew back to smash that fragile creature against the wall. Only the sudden fear on my mother's face stopped me. I pushed the bird away from me as though it was on fire.

Bobby and T.J. and my mother held their birds up. Turned them this way and that. I made myself look. Each bird was completely different from the other three, the largest, about four inches from tip of wing to wing, the smallest, maybe two. And here's the thing³/₄all four birds were in flight.

My mother squeezed my shoulder; then she cleared away the coffee cups. Bobby set the whiskey bottle back in the cupboard and they began to draw wad after wad from the box. I saw that the date on the one of the newspapers was as recent as 1981. Each time one of them reached a center, they held up the bird they'd uncovered for the others to examine. They didn't say much and they did not extend any of them toward me. They seemed to know that I would not, for the life of me, could not, touch them.

Every round of three birds, T.J. would hold each one, sometimes swoop or glide it through the air, depending on what the tilt of its wings seemed to suggest. My mother worked at spreading each set out carefully before they started on another group. I found myself looking at those ordered rows as one might exotic specimens in a freak show, that mixture of fascination and dread. The birds had three things in common³/₄all of them were in flight, all of them were things of beauty, and set deep in each flying body was the slight curve of a wire loop, raised just enough to slip a thread or bitty hook through.

I was surprised to see that even though none of the birds had their distinguishing colors, my mother knew most of the names³/₄a chickadee, a nut hatch; a junco, maybe; a mourning dove, no question; a cardinal or perhaps a blue jay. She even went out to the

garage and got a much used bird book she said was my father's. From the pictures Bobby identified a killdeer, a finch, a swallow, a grosbeak.

Though I had no desire to touch them, I knew I could not leave. "Forget the bus," I said. "I'll call Steve and go in the morning."

Later I tried to get my mind to go into the mystery of my father and the birds. My father and those fragile creations. Like putting the birds on one side and my father on the other and trying to get the scale to balance. How could *this* possibly go with *that*? But that night^{3/4}the night of the birds^{3/4}something in me, in us all knew better than to try to give it a name.

The birds were carved out of many different kinds of wood. T.J. was the expert on woods. He had been a model builder. Bobby always said it was the glue, but I always thought it was his way of dealing.

"What kind of wood do you think this one is, T.J.?", my mother said.

Maybe cherry. Smell it^{3/4}black walnut. White pine. Rosewood. Already there were at least twenty, tipped in flight across the table, a regular bird sanctuary. Beneath the wads, there were stacks of graph paper, with precise drawings of wings carefully ruled, little numbers noting the angles, the lengths and widths. Clearly it was the wings that mattered most.

Finally Bobby came to the bottom. At this point he had moved the box to straddle the two sinks to make more room. We studied the delicate birds spread out before us. Each of them glowed with a soft sheen, rubbed and rubbed with some sort of low gloss oil, T.J. explained. We could have said beautiful, unbelievable, perfect, fragile. But we didn't.

All of a sudden T.J. hopped up. "I know what we need," he said. He clattered up the back stairs and returned with several spools of dark and light thread. Without a word, Bobby pushed those off to the side and went out to the garage. He returned with a roll of fishing line and a packet of thumb tacks. He retrieved his drink and replenished it. Then he took out a knife. First he lifted a bird, and studied it, as if he was judging what layer of space it should inhabit,

then he cut a length of line, threaded it through the loop and tied it tight. T.J. stepped from a chair onto the long counter and Bobby handed him the first bird, a pale dove. Using my shoulder my mother climbed to the top of the step stool and Bobby handed her the line of the next bird. When she raised her hand to fasten it above the sink, I took hold of her waist band, just to ground her, anticipate any wobble.

There was no plan. Bobby determined the lengths. T.J. and my mother got their own rhythm, picked their own spots. I anchored. Before long, birds were floating in the air above us. Bobby opened the windows and doors all through the downstairs. He lit a bunch of candles and set them around the kitchen, then switched off the lights. Going from bird to bird, Bobby gave each one a gentle push. The birds' winged-silhouettes moved across the walls.

No, they did not soar, but they did turn and turn and turn back again. Along with them, our four shadows, our hands reaching up. And this is what finally came to me³/₄here we all were³/₄homing in, searching out a safe place for the night.

