

When the Songbirds Went Silent in Cheerytown

by Mathew Paust

The only person who felt bad about the death of Menuhin was Bobby Bayly. It was Bobby who killed Menuhin with a single copper BB from his Red Ryder air rifle.

Bobby felt good at first about shooting Menuhin. He shot the bird to keep it from diving at his cat, Bandit, who had only one eye. Bobby was terribly worried that Menuhin would peck out the other eye, leaving Bandit blind.

When he first saw it happen, the bird diving, screaming at Bandit again and again, smacking her on the head from behind, the poor cat wondering what was happening, he ran across the yard shouting and waving his arms, but managed to scare only Bandit. Menuhin paid him no mind.

He decided then and there to get the air rifle from his closet and keep it on the porch.

The boy had not intended to kill Menuhin. He knew of the saying that one should never kill a mockingbird. He didn't know why, but because it was a saying, he hoped only to scare the bird away or maybe just wound it a little.

When the time came, the bird diving and screaming at Bandit, Bobby grabbed the air rifle, cocked it and rested the barrel against one of the porch posts to steady his aim. He was a fair shot with a .22, but the air rifle's projectile was much smaller and lighter, with a much slower velocity. It was hard enough to hit a stationary target at close range with an air-powered BB. The odds of even coming near a bird in angry flight with one were nigh impossible.

So it was with a bit of keenly prideful surprise that Bobby Bayly watched the BB arc out from the end of his air rifle's barrel in a glint of afternoon sunlight and conclude its ballistic flight in juncture with the abrupt end of the bird's warrior screech. An astounded Bobby

followed the now silent dive's finish in a feathery *plop* not three feet from his oblivious half-blind cat.

Bobby cried soon after he approached Menuhin's stone-dead body. It shocked his sensibility to see the once fierce creature become a sad little puddle of feathers with two skinny legs sticking up. The bird had hit the ground head first.

"I'm sorry," Bobby said quietly as he waved a hand to fend off Bandit's approach. "I didn't mean to hurt you. You were you chasing my kitty."

He tugged at one of the feet, hoping Menuhin was only stunned. Then he saw the head was bent at an impossible angle. The tip of the beak had broken off. The eyes were open but glazed, a pale, milky blue. Menuhin was indeed dead, and Bobby knelt over the body and cried.

Now, what Bobby Bayly did not know, what he had no earthly reason to know, was that while he shed his tears for the death of a single unwelcome, obnoxious bird, the ambivalence he felt was but a prelude to the deluge of mixed emotions this odd little happenstance was destined to visit upon the people of Cheerytown.

Perhaps the oddest thing about Menuhin's death, in light of the unknowable consequences it would have on Cheerytown's future, was that the only mourner Menuhin would ever have was Bobby Bayly.

Some might think, and justifiably so, that the reason Cheerytown's songbirds stopped singing after Menuhin died was to honor him. In fact, the opposite was true. The songbirds had been silent in Cheerytown for generations. All but the mockingbirds, that is.

It was the mockingbirds that stopped singing the morning after Bobby Bayly buried Menuhin in the garden to keep Bandit from playing with the corpse. And it wasn't to pay their leader tribute they stopped singing. The mockingbirds were celebrating their freedom from the bully who forced them to sing every morning whether they wanted to or not, whether they had sore throats or felt blue or were simply sick and tired of singing for the other songbirds

to beak-sync along and pretend they were the ones doing the singing to serenade prospective mates, worship rain, entertain joggers and walkers and children, or just for the hell of it.

The bizarre phenomenon that led to this ceding to the mockingbirds by the other songbirds of their vocal heritage was perhaps the fault of a single gene. This at least was the theory broached by one of the ornithologists, many from far parts, who swarmed into Cheerytown to study The Silence. But the discovery of what had been happening with Cheerytown's songbirds was Elizabeth Turlingale's alone. Not that it mattered much that Elizabeth Turlingale, known in Cheerytown as "Birdy," which was short for "Birdbrain Betty," was the one who made this phenomenal discovery.

Elizabeth Turlingale was not socially agreeable. Born to a poor, graceless family, she came to believe early on that she was not likable. This sense began with evidence she interpreted to mean that her parents did not like her. She did not know why it was so, but at this tender, formative age she soon accepted the evidence as true. It was only a small logical step from there to believing that if her own parents did not like her there would be no reason for anyone else to like her, and then a quick half-step from that belief to accepting that in fact no one did or ever would.

As she got older this notion became hard as granite. She expressed it in an attitude that preemptively rejected anyone who tried to be friendly or who offered even the most innocent civility. She kept herself distant from all human contact. She lived in an outlying woods, entering town only to scrounge for food in restaurant trash bins and to visit her dearest friends, the birds.

Their singing was her greatest joy. She came to know the voices so well she could tell individual birds apart just by hearing them. And as they became more and more familiar to her ear she found she preferred the songs of the town birds, as they were much better singers than those that stayed in the woods. And one day moments after dawn she made her first discovery of a town bird faking his song.

The birds were celebrating an especially glorious morning. They sang with inspired spirits, taking cues from each other and seeming to join together no matter the distance between them. To an ecstatic Elizabeth Turlingale the voices of her winged friends that morning comprised an improvisational choir that sounded as if it extended over all of Cheerytown.

Alone this early, well before the usual joggers and all but one of the walkers would appear, Elizabeth Turlingale found herself so excited by the symphony of chirping and warbling and tweeting and trilling that she danced through town along the mile stretch of Church Street (so named for the many houses of orthodox worship lining both sides). She had just completed a perfect pirouette under Round Robin's sweet gum tree and was regaining her balance when she caught a glimpse of the plump, orange-breasted thrush perched on a branch, singing his heart out.

She stood, transfixed, watching Round Robin perform the most amazing, sublimely beautiful song she had ever heard from him. And he seemed to know this one was special. He'd fill his lungs, throw his head back and open his beak wide. She could almost see clusters of little black musical notes tumbling out and flitting up on wings of their own among the sweet gum leaves. He was entrancing her. She wanted to sing along.

And then it stopped.

At first it was the song. Round Robin still appeared to be singing, puffing his chest, throwing his head back, teetering on the branch, tail flared, his beak as wide as ever as if hurling beautiful music into the air, except there was no music. No song.

Elizabeth Turlingale thought maybe something had caught in his throat. A bug, maybe. Maybe it flew in and was choking him. She started to panic for him. Wondered if she could jump high enough to reach the end of the branch and tug it down so she could get to Round Robin, tap him on the back, maybe, or even reach her fingers in and pull out whatever it was that was stuck. She jumped up and down a few times but the branch was too high. Her fingers didn't even touch the lowest leaves. She wondered if she were to call for

help would anyone come out of the houses, or one of the churches? Or would one of the few cars or trucks that passed by this early maybe stop?

She took a deep breath and was just about to shout when she saw that Round Robin's beak had closed and he was looking at her. He seemed in no distress at all. Just perching on the branch, shifting his feet a little to get a better grip, but with his beak closed. Then his beak opened again and he puffed his chest and threw back his head. But there was no song. A couple of seconds later the song started again.

Elizabeth Turlingale wondered if it was her, not Round Robin. Maybe that last pirouette, perfect though it was, had done something to her. To her head, or her hearing, or something. She continued to stare at Round Robin, and he at her, and she watched and listened as the strange dissynchronization of his singing went on as before. She was so rapt in watching and listening that she didn't hear the footsteps.

"Mornin', Birdy." It was Old Man Grumpass. That was her name for him. She didn't know his real name, and didn't care. Every so often their paths merged on the sidewalks of Church Street. He was an early walker, as was she, and whenever she saw him the two of them were invariably the only walkers out. She resented his presence. Nosy old fart. Always said "Mornin', Birdy" as if he knew her. Who the hell did he think he was? And what was with this "Birdy" anyway? Wasn't her name. Grumpy old fart, shuffling along. Always wore his dumbass cap. To cover up a bald spot, probly. Why couldn't he stay at home like everyone else? Leave her alone? Old fart...

She tore her eyes from Round Robin in time to catch Old Man Grumpass staring at her with his meanass face. She made a meanass face back at him. He looked away and kept shuffling along. She looked back up at Round Robin. She changed her mind. Turned and called out to Old Man Grumpass.

He stopped, turned around and looked at her, raising his chin slightly in a questioning way. She started telling him about Round

Robin and how she thought at first there was something wrong with him and how his singing would stop but his beak was still open and then his beak would close and the singing would start up again and how maybe a bug or something was caught in his throat and what if he was choking and then how she thought maybe it was her that she was dizzy from spinning and something might have come loose in her head or done something to her hearing and...

Old Man Grumpass stared at her awhile, mouth hanging open, as she chattered away in her high-pitched, high-speed voice. Finally he closed his mouth and shook his head. He started to reach for his back pocket. Changed his mind. "Have a good day, Birdy," he said, turned and shuffled on up the sidewalk.

"Fuck you!" Elizabeth Turlingale shrieked after him.

Face scarlet with rage, she stared after him and screamed her curse a few more times. The old man kept on his way, ignoring her. When she turned back to Round Robin she saw Menuhin perched on a nearby branch. It didn't take her long to see what was happening.

It took the ornithologists who came to Cheerytown from all over the world three months to make the same discovery. To their credit, they didn't have nearly as much to work with. For one, all of the songbirds were silent, even the mockingbirds. And then there was Elizabeth Turlingale, or her lack thereof. She avoided them like the plague. Fuck them, she'd decided. If she was nothing else, Elizabeth Turlingale was a woman who stuck to her guns.

She ceased her morning walks on Church Street after the second day of what came to be called The Silence. No point anymore. The birds in her woods still sang, not nearly so grandly as the town birds, but, she decided, better than not singing at all.

No one else in Cheerytown except Old Man Grumpass paid enough attention to notice the birds had gone silent. Everyone else was too wrapped up in their own affairs to miss the singing in the trees and bushes and on the rooftops. The serious birder-watchers preferred places more remote. The joggers and other walkers listened to recorded music through little pods in their ears. The youngsters, in addition to keeping the ears plugged with pods,

stared at little digital devices that connected them to the Internet and allowed them to take pictures of themselves and each other. Nearly everyone in Cheerytown who might have heard the birds at all, heard only noise.

The exception was Old Man Grumpass, whose real name was Benjamin Bourderlein. The first day of The Silence, on the morning after Menuhin's death, Benjamin Bourderlein and Elizabeth Turlingale passed each other on the sidewalk as if the other were not there. Benjamin Bourderlein had been refraining from his customary "Mornin', Birdy" ever since their unpleasant encounter of several weeks past. He refrained again on the first morning of The Silence. Elizabeth Turlingale, at the moment they passed on that morning, made a rude sound with her lips, as if she were breaking wind. On the second morning she in fact did break wind at that very instance. There was no third meeting. Benjamin Bourderlein never laid eyes on Elizabeth Turlingale again.

Her absence on the third day affected Benjamin Bourderlein in an unexpected way. It occurred to him as he began his morning walk that his mind had been so occupied in dwelling on his unpleasant encounter with Birdy that he was not enjoying the walks. He decided then and there, when the realization occurred to him, that when he met Birdy on the sidewalk this time, which he fully expected to come about, he would return to his earlier attitude toward her and say, "Mornin', Birdy." He hoped the gesture might return things to normal. He wished he knew her real name so he could say it instead, thereby possibly improving the odds she would stop making farting sounds when they met.

About halfway through his walk, way past where he and Birdy usually met, he sensed—he knew without knowing—he would not be meeting her this morning. It was precisely then, when he realized Birdy would not appear, that it dawned on him the birds were not singing. None of them. Not at all. It was an awareness that started as a mere prick of curiosity but soon descended on him with an engulfing gloom the likes of which he'd not felt, ever, in his life. The silence was thunderous, ominous, its presence burgeoning with the

brutal dominance of a powerful storm, and it frightened him to his core. His knees became weak, his shoulders and upper arms ached, and he felt nauseous.

Benjamin Bourderlein collapsed on the sidewalk. The concrete dislodged his cap, which flopped upended onto the grassy border next to the curb.

Cheerytown muddled along in its somnambulant way for a good month after Benjamin Bourderlein collapsed before the townsfolk began to understand something dire was happening. Benjamin Bourderlein's ramblings to the staff at Singlepayer General Hospital didn't help. In fact they probably added a week or more to what otherwise likely would have been a natural osmosis of rumor from the town's seniors.

Benjamin Bourderlein, a once beloved high school language arts teacher, had been deemed "a little nuts" ever since he stood up during a school board meeting and ranted about discipline problems and how neither administrators nor parents supported the teachers and it was the fault of smart phones and television and ear pods and other distractions, including too many lawyers.

The board and audience sat in stunned silence during this diatribe, which extended beyond the time limit for speakers by seven minutes and twenty-six seconds. Only when he started singing, badly, a John Prine song about blowing up televisions and tossing out newspapers and so forth did the board chairwoman snap out of her aghasted trance, rap her gavel and gently remind Benjamin Bourderlein that his time "regrettably" was up. This had the effect of startling Benjamin Bourderlein out of *his* trance, whereupon he stared at the chairwoman for several seconds, started to back away from the lectern, tripped on a power cord and landed heavily on his oversized rump, shaking the warped cypress-plank floor so significantly the lectern's microphone overturned with an electronic *WHOKK* followed by *SCREEEEEE*ing feedback that seemed never to want to end and drove several older audience members out of the meeting hall, hands clapped over ears.

Benjamin Bourderlein had saved up enough unused sick time to take the rest of the year off, which he did. From there he segued into retirement.

It surprised no one, therefore, when word leaked out through Singlepayer General Hospital's staff, that Benjamin Bourderlein was blaming his collapse on the birds. Such "news" was met uniformly with snickers, guffaws, and rolling eyes. No one, neither the town's health care professionals nor the sufferers or their friends or loved ones, made any connection between Benjamin Bourderlein's "usual bullshit" and the noticeable uptick in requests for tranquilizer prescriptions, or in liquor store sales, calls to the suicide hotline, bar fights, fender benders, marital discord, dogs howling, and squirrels acting more squirrely than ever before.

At least not for the first two-and-a-half weeks.

The recognition tipping point came during a phone conversation between Muriel Culligan and best friend, Janie Louise Bertram. The women were in their gardens, plucking weeds, fussing with tomato plants and shooing away their cats. Each had her cellphone clapped to an ear.

"Too quiet? Yeah, I know. Yeah. Yeah. Huh? No, there's no fracking going on around here. Uh uh. Listen! No! I'm telling you, that was just something somebody put in the paper about what if, you know? What would happen if they did it. Not that anybody *is* doing it, you know? No, Janie Louise! No. Go back and read it again. It isn't fracking, but I don't know what it is. Birds? They what? Hang on." Muriel took the phone from her ear. Listened, intently, looked around, her eyes growing wide, jaw dropping. She clapped the phone back in place. When she next spoke, her voice held a new respect for her best friend.

"Oh my God! It *is*, Janie Louise! You're right, it's the fucking birds! They're not singing. I didn't hear *any* birds. How long do you suppose it's been like this? Are they all dead? My God!"

Muriel Culligan quickly got rid of her friend, reached down, flung the cat out of the garden for the eighth time that morning, brought Facebook up on her phone's screen, tapped up the Cheerytown

Photos and News group and posted her “discovery.” By the end of the day the discussion thread on her post contained eighty-seven comments, some bordering on hysteria. A companion Tweet on Twitter went viral even sooner. Three days later, that week's edition of the local paper carried seven letters and an editorial about the silent birds. Reporters from two of the three TV stations that served Cheerytown arrived with camera crews early the following week, and one of them managed to sell the story to its affiliated national network.

“Before you could say Jack Robinson,” a giggling Muriel Culligan told Janie Louise Bertram, news teams from as far away as the United Kingdom and the People's Republic of China were landing at nearby airports, renting cars and showing up in town. This time the cat-flinging gardeners were chatting in person in a booth at The Cider Club, the town's fashionable tavern, where they were celebrating having “finally put Cheerytown on the map.”

And before anyone could say Jack Robinson again the tourists began to arrive, in droves, and not too terribly long after that came the scientists. The town bulged with strangers spending money, and the townsfolk, a tad leery at first, soon warmed to the idea of playing host. Local birders joined in the entrepreneurial spirit with early morning guided foot tours up and down Church Street, identifying species and playing corresponding songs and calls on digital devices while the tourists watched the live birds dance on tree branches and beak-sync along with the recorded voices.

The only species that refused to play were the mockingbirds. These thrashers would perch on tree limbs, utility poles and rooftops and glare at the human spectacle. Occasionally one would swoop down silently and buzz the guides, apparently aiming at the hand-held devices that emitted the calls. One mockingbird indeed scored such a coup, knocking the device out of the guide's hand and then swooping back up to its perch. The guide kept her eye fixed on the attacker as she bent to retrieve her device from the pavement, where it lay chirping and tweeting as if to mock the bird it had angered.

Only one incidence of friction developed between the townsfolk and the scientists—and it was brief. It came about when a scientist from Ethiopia had seven cages of singing songbirds shipped to Cheerytown to see if whatever had caused the local birds to go silent would affect the newcomers. The scientists had determined the local birds were physically healthy in every respect. They had healthy larynxes. The birds, the scientists surmised, must simply have forgotten how to sing. They danced and flew playfully, and they reproduced just as prolifically as singing birds. They pretended to sing, but no sound came out.

What really baffled the scientists was that the mockingbirds did not even pretend to sing.

The Ethiopian scientist didn't tell anybody when he arranged to have the singing birds brought in. The rift with the townsfolk happened when the crates arrived. Within hours the town council got involved, expressing concern that the new birds might be carrying some disease. No one wanted to admit publicly the real concern, that if birds started singing again in Cheerytown, its bonanza would end.

Papers the Ethiopian scientist produced for the council proving his birds had passed all necessary inspections, certifying they were free of disease, slowed the town's resistance. What settled the issue was the extremely short visit by the new birds in town. Within a single day the local mockingbirds had chased them all into the woods, and there they remained.

From this demonstration the scientists theorized that the mockingbirds ran the town—its birds, anyway. The scientists then hypothesized that the highly competitive mockingbirds had intimidated the other birds to the extent they were afraid to sing. Perhaps, they said, this had gone on for generations, affecting the genetics of the cowed birds to the extent they lost the instinct to sing. It seemed logical then that the mockingbirds not just bullied the other birds to silence, but now had a monopoly on singing. They sang while the other birds only pretended to sing.

The only question remaining, and it was a thorny one, was what had induced the mockingbirds to stop singing. This is when Bobby Bayly joined the discussion.

Bobby Bayly had been keeping track of theories several of the scientists visiting Cheerytown were posting online. Posting anonymously, he told them about shooting Menuhin the day before The Silence was said to have started.

Aha, came one scientific response, they were mourning the dominant mockingbird's death!

Nonsense, another expert rejoined. Mockingbirds don't mourn. As dominant males go, this mockingbird obviously was a tyrant, perhaps from a long line of tyrants. He bullied his own clan. They were sick of him, sick of singing. They were celebrating. With silence.

The discussion boiled into an argument that raged among the scientists from then until long after they'd packed up and left. Theories were staked out and book contracts signed. Reputations were now on the line. They'd gotten all they wanted from Cheerytown.

Cheerytown had what it wanted, too. Tourists. They flocked in every spring like the swallows to Capistrano. And it would remain this way, the townsfolk whispered, so long as The Silence remained.

