

The Birdcage

by Nicki Pombier Berger

I was floating from buffet to buffet, buoyed by gimlets, when I first saw the magician. A few older women were clustered around him, and I watched from a nearby table while he rendered them practically boneless. They gripped each other's elbows. They tittered and yelped. I moved to the edge of their circle and watched while the magician stabbed the nine of hearts through with one woman's lapel pin, a diamond articulated dove; he folded the card into a triangle, vanished it from one hand and made it reappear, unwrinkled, unpoked, in the liner pocket of another woman's jacket.

The women shrieked. They melted.

I admit that I was impressed, but mine was a passing, intellectual curiosity, and I didn't stick around for another act. I was not a woman predisposed to wonder. Though my mother had done her best to bestow in me her faith in the rewards of an invisible God, I was not a believer in much beyond the evidentiary demands placed on the everyday in my line of work. As a litigation lawyer, I was attuned to the ways in which logic and language could align to advance a particular reality in what might amount, for writers or romantics, to a kind of magic. But there was no magic in it for me, and though by any estimate my adult life was rather charmed, there was nothing that you would call magical about it. Frankly, I wasn't looking for it.

What I was looking for in the moment was my husband. We were at the holiday party for the investment-banking firm Mike worked for, whose imminent bankruptcy, the result of a faith in the failed magic of real estate securities, was evidenced nowhere. Mike wasn't worried — I did well enough to carry us if need be, and we were kidless, and he was a programmer, exceptionally hireable, and dependant as I was on language and its laws. Although his binary dialect was an incomprehensible to me as I'm sure my legal motions would be to him, if I ever were to share one with him.

I saw Mike across the room, talking to a trio of supremely pregnant co-workers. He didn't see me, and I stepped in line for another drink. I was thirty-six, we had already been married eight years, and the absence of a baby was beginning to take a shape as prominent and intrusive as a pregnant belly. I just wasn't ready, and Mike didn't pressure me, and what business anyone had to think something about it was beyond me.

Waiting in line, I looked back for the magician, and found him looking right at me. He smiled and pointed to his shoulder. I touched mine, and there it was, tucked beneath the thin ribbon of my shoulder strap: the nine of hearts.

I felt it there, cool as a palm, and that—the sudden feeling, upon seeing, when before I'd felt nothing—was as disconcerting as if it were his hand there.

I took out the card and looked up, and he was nowhere. I put the card on my plate and my plate on a buffet and ordered my gimlet, and as the bartender handed it over, I wanted the card back. When I turned, the plate was gone.

I wandered into the main room of the party, where Mike's firm had hired Cirque performers for entertainment that year. Winding and flinging themselves from thick pale ribbons strung from the distant ceiling were countless women, flat of chest with faces exaggerated and silent as mimes, with bodies like taffy, flying through contortions so fluid and extreme they succeeded briefly in penetrating the smug detachment that my fourth gimlet and eight years of these parties permitted.

"They're like birds."

I turned. There was Mike's boss, standing over a cheese wheel so large and solid it appeared impenetrable, scouting out a point of entry. He pointed his fork toward the ceiling, bird-wise, and picked up a roll of roast beef, nibbling at its burnt-black edge.

"Canaries or something," he said, drawing a curlicue in the air with the meat. "Parrots. Cockatoos. Who knows."

"Definitely not pigeons," I said.

A performer in a butter colored leotard soared slowly above us just then, her bare legs bound in spirals of ribbon, her upside-down face a pantomime of sadness, brow lined, mouth tight. Her eyes as they passed over me were full with a sorrow so convincing and specific, so intentional, it felt as though it were just for me, and to my complete surprise I felt my own throat closing, my eyes filling.

Mike's boss laughed at her timing, and I played along. As the acrobat passed above us, he gripped his highball and tapped his roll of roast against the edge of his plate as though ashing a cigarette. "Just like birds," he said, shaking his head. He raised his eyebrows and gave me a dimpled down-smile and said, "Kate," my name, by way of goodbye.

I wish I could say that I believe everything that happened thereafter was somehow orchestrated by Mike's bank (as theme or entertainment) or another higher power (as symbol or omen), but as a believer in neither, I have to ascribe all subsequent events to a cultivated and localized havoc that only the magician could wreck.

What happened was this: I started seeing birds.

At first, it was just the likeness of birds. I went in search of Mike, to bring him before the acrobat so that I could reject her projected sorrow, which I had begun to feel for what it was probably was: pity. I wanted to stand beneath her laughing with my husband, shining in the peacock blue dress I'd dared, my bare chest unadorned, my stomach purposefully flat, my hair swept back and freshly dyed to my teenage auburn, a light grip on a glass of white wine, animating for her my charmed life, flaunting my marital happiness. Instead I came face to face with the hummingbird earrings of a woman of at least sixty. She had pecked her way into the cheese wheel and was nibbling at a pungent wedge no more than a foot away from me. I turned away from her, and standing at the meat table was a man whose tie was patterned with interlocking robins like some ornithological Escher. Poor taste, to be sure, and bizarre, even I would admit, but nothing to be alarmed by, or to comment on.

I left the Cirque room, and as I passed through a single corridor, I counted no fewer than four silver bird necklaces of varying lengths,

and while I began to wonder whether this meant that a fifth gimlet was inadvisable or essential, I could still talk away the neckwear, chalk it up to the trickle-down fashion of hipsters that inevitably made its way into the halls of finance. Birds were, to be sure, still very much in the air over Williamsburg, and therefore it was not only reasonable, it was expected, that they would alight on the breastbones of these young banking women. I myself owned at least two shirts of avian motif, and peacock-feather earrings, and a feather-fringed skirt, so what, after all, was so strange about seeing my fourth, and fifth, and now sixth bird-based accessory?

But then: The tattoo of a raven on the neck of a caterer? Wings on the wrists of a waitress? The actual word FLY written on the fingers of the bartender shaking my fifth gimlet?

The plastic parrot atop my stir stick?

A man knocked into me, spilling his drink, and I saw them at his wrists: eagle crest cufflinks.

I put down my drink and made for the bathroom, but even there, the bathroom attendant was reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and, in the mirror, there was the tremor of a feather in my own hair, peacock, pinned just above my temple, drawing out the flame in my hair, the cool of my dress.

I took out the barrette and threw it away, and made my way to the room where I thought I'd left Mike. I didn't see anyone I knew, which only added to my growing paranoia; after ten years, I knew a lot of bankers. I pulled over by an oyster table to comfort myself with the safely birdless suit-backs of the men lined up in front of me, and with the oysters themselves, as far from flight as animals can get, limbless and slick, more like an organ than an organism, like little stopped hearts. I picked one up and slurped it down and that's when I heard it: a caw, distant but definite. I looked up and there was a bird, flying heavily between the vacant eyes of unlit stage lights. It landed on a catwalk up there, ruffled its feathers, and cawed again. This was no sparrow, no chickadee, none of those small birds that sometimes make their way into auditoriums or subway stations or stadiums and dart around, causing delightful little spasms of

communal shrieks and laughter, until they find an exit. This was a crow — a crow! — as menacing in its comfortable incongruity as if Hitchcock himself had planted it there.

I looked around but no one else seemed to hear or otherwise notice the bird above us, possibly the first of thousands soon to come, thousands with intent to descend and blind us with their beaks, deafen us with their Biblically thunderous wingbeats, feathers loosed in their fury and drifting amidst us like ash, burnt scraps of paper, the crowded ceiling descending, unraveling, crumpling down on us in the shapes of these birds, each bird a shard of our untold truths and failed hopes and petty victories, a bird for each transgression—

But. I didn't believe in transgressions, didn't believe in Biblical fury, didn't tamp my hopes down into some dark inner pearl. I was fine, just fine. I plucked an ice cube from the platter of oysters and sucked it, nice and slow. I smiled at the caterer standing over the shellfish. He had the loveliest skin, cloudy tan, like wet sand, smooth as a sea-stone and completely blank. I Frenched the cube of ice and felt myself returning. I looked up: the bird was gone, and I moved to the window, flush with a confidence and relief that madwomen and moviegoers will surely recognize as precursor to the true worst of things to come.

The night sky had that cozy glow that signaled the hope of snow. I pressed my forehead against the window in an effort to better see the snake of taillights on Sixth Avenue below. I lived most of my life then at such heights — my office was on the fifty-first floor of a building nearby, and Mike and I lived in a high-rise across town — but still, the experience of standing at a lookout like that, with the city's millions distant and near, preposterous in breadth and number, beneath and beside and above me, dying and alive, silenced by the glass and as good as imagined, was probably the closest I ever got to wonder. Wonder with a light dose of nausea.

I needed to touch something. I fingered a Pollock of waterspots on the glass, and was about to turn around when it struck. A bird. What else? *Bam*, right into the window, and I shrieked. No one seemed to

hear, or if they did, no one took notice. The music suddenly went up a decibel or three, and with the panicked feeling that is the opposite of surprise but also the embodiment of shock, I recognized the opening notes of *Free Bird*.

A few of the younger men grinned at one another as they realized what song was on, raising their glasses as if they were cans of Budweiser and the song signaled some shared misplaced nostalgia for a life none of them would ever really want, and then someone inevitably hollered out, "Free bird!" and that's when I lost it.

I slid along the window until I was behind an unmanned banquet emptied of food. I dropped to the floor and crawled under the table, pulling the heavy drapery still behind me. The dark was pitch, and the song out there was just sound. The carpet was a comfort and a surprise. The table was high enough for me to sit up and I took off my heels and wrapped my arms around my legs and pressed my face into my knees.

And then came the magic.

I saw fingers lift the curtain, and I saw feet, and then shins, and, all at once as though it had materialized when the curtain was fully lifted, I saw the birdcage. And then I saw the magician.

He peeked in at me and smiled. Up close, his face was round and pale and there was something Eastern European to it. It wouldn't have surprised me to learn that he was from someplace like Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia, someplace that no longer exists. But with no trace of an accent, he said hi, and I did too, and these two words, that most normal of greetings, made for the most salutary exchange I could have had in that moment, more so than anything I would have had with Mike, who would have needed an explanation for my absence, for my tears, who would have worried and wondered what he'd done, who would have known this for another symptom that all was not well in our neat little world and insisted we talk about it, who would have taken care of me the best way he knew how, who would have pulled me out by the hand and walked me quickly to the coat check and whisked me off in a cab, home where I would've had no escape from the need to explain. But what,

what could I say, what could I explain? And so there was magic in especially this, in the magician's simple hello.

And then he climbed in with me.

He arranged himself cross-legged across from me, and leaned back out to pull in the birdcage, which was to my great relief empty. I scooped my legs beneath me, smoothed my dress down over my knees. Brushed my hair back behind my ears. Adjusted my bra strap.

He lit a squat white candle and let it drip into the center of the birdcage, then stamped the candle into the puddle of wax. He grinned at me as if he'd been grinning at me for decades, and pulled the curtain closed. His face vanished. The birdcage lantern cast little light, but I could see his hands, and the cards they worked like thought made visible, fast and synoptic, hypnotic, yes, and I stared and stared.

"Pick a card," he said, and I chose one from the fan.

Nine of hearts.

"Remember it, okay?"

Nine of hearts. Nine of hearts.

"Have you got it?"

I nodded, and then spoke. "Nine of hearts."

Our laughter threw the flame into spasms. He tried again, and this time I kept it in my mind: Jack of diamonds. I released the card back to him and it took on a life of its own, surfacing over and over as though it were some kind of gravity or true north the deck must always come to rest on, no matter the configuration, no matter the shuffle or split. And then it took flight from the deck entirely, appearing in my hair, in the crook of my arm, tucked in the inner velvet of the tiny clutch I'd forgotten I had with me. He opened his pocket calendar and there it was, handwritten in the little box on my birth-date: Jack of Diamonds. He tore it into shards and opened his mouth and pulled it whole and dry from within. He was attractive in that subtly idiosyncratic way I liked, either my age or ageless, with the chin skin of a daily shaver. And he was undoubtedly into me, had more than likely followed my decent into lunacy from the acrobat straight on through all the birds.

“Hand me your ring,” he said.

A pause. In our silence the muffled party out there raged on, and I could tell even through the curtain that things were approaching that level of hysteria they do around midnight, when things start to get middle school, slip into cliché, when secret crushes get clumsily revealed, when kisses are sloppily planted, when threesomes are casually suggested in transparent jest, when desperation is betrayed on everyone's faces, when even the happiest of us begin to wonder whether we aren't, after all, deeply unsatisfied, or whether our satisfaction is in fact just complacency, whether we are all as pitiable as the acrobat saw me to be. I thought about the birds, and about Mike, who would be alternately worrying and not thinking about me, and was glad beyond measure to be down here.

Hand me your ring, he'd said.

“First tell me something about what you're doing. One thing.”

“Okay... Magicians never tell their secrets.”

“Something I don't already know.”

I heard the wingbeats of cards shuffled, shuffled and shuffled, a separate breath under here with us, a third living thing.

“Magic is wasted on believers,” he said.

“I'm no believer.”

“Marriage is a believer's game.”

Under normal circumstances I would have immediately dismissed him, I would have quickly and with minimal kindness extricated myself from the situation, but there is no denying that under normal circumstances I would not have found myself beneath a banquette, neither for the weeping of Under-Table Act I, nor for the delight and bewilderment of Act II, nor for what appeared to be moving steadily toward seduction and betrayal in the final Act.

I handed him my wedding ring.

He made it disappear.

My nose stung. I turned my face so he couldn't see.

He reached toward me, and his wrist brushed my ribs. I stiffened.

“Shh,” he said, “I’m just…” He pulled a tissue box out from behind me in the most ordinary of gestures. I took it and clutched it in my lap with both hands, as if it would fly away if I let go.

Before that night, I hadn't cried in I don't know how long.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Sorry, I’m sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me.”

“Why are you sorry?”

Again I thought of Mike.

Of how he'd react with a skeptical wonder amounting to joy if I told him about the birds.

Of how, knowing this, I know I won't try.

Of how just yesterday he sketched and framed a fat, maternal owl for our friends' baby son.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, thinking of the things of Mike's that are just for me: his obsessive neatness with his drawings of fauna, his terrible, earnest renditions of songs from bands like Stone Temple Pilots, the way his fingers strain against the strings of his guitar, the way he gets frustrated moving between chords and I can see the teen there, huffing. The way he lapses into two chord sing-along songs after giving up on grunge, the way he favors “Robin in the Rain.” The way his jaw creaks in his sleep, the way he stinks in the morning, the way he wept that once, on our third date, telling me of the sister he'd lost when he was seven, she was three, and the way he never mentioned it again.

I'm sorry.

Mike.

I'm sorry I don't always know if all this adds up to what's supposed to be love.

I love you, I do, in the way I know how.

I'm sorry I'm stuck.

“I feel trapped.” I felt a small release, like the words themselves were birds that had been waiting to be freed.

“I feel trapped. Sorry. I feel ridiculous.”

“Stop being sorry, it's okay. It's just that magicians don't believe in trapped.”

"How convenient for you," I said. I could feel the closeness of his face, feel his hand on my bare arm, the grainy rub of his pant leg against my thigh where my skirt slid up under the coaxing of either magic or his other hand, which touched me so lightly that, of all that night's questionable realities, it was the one thing I could not convince myself was really there.

We kissed.

"I can't," I said.

He let me go.

He blew out the candle. There was the momentary tang of candle smoke, scattered by a sudden rush of wings, and the immediacy of another breathing thing in the dark. I heard the birdcage open, and the bird fluttering in there without crying out. The door clicked closed, the bird calmed, and my semi-adjusted eyes could see its fat white form floating before me in the dark. The magician found my hand and pinched one fingertip, and then touched my knuckle with the small cold circle of my ring.

"I'll go out first," he said, and he did, leaving me alone with the dark and the bird. He peeked back down in a minute or two. "Coast is clear."

I crawled out with as much dignity as I could muster, and the evening began to right itself. The magician was shorter than I would have guessed, and younger, too, more adorable. I felt visibly old, and pulled my shoulders back, looked down at my dress, smoothed out a wrinkle. He pulled the birdcage out and produced a comb and ran it through his thick hair in two quick strokes. The bird was, of course, a dove.

We walked silently to the elevator as if we were ending a date and I was walking him to the door. Someone else had already pushed the button but no one was around. The elevator opened and he held the birdcage out to keep the doors from closing.

"The thing is," he said, "you *can*."

I knew. I know.

"That's what differentiates us from them," he said, giving the birdcage a little shake. "You have a choice. Free will."

I know.

“You sound like my mother,” I said, and that was the end of the magic.

He handed me his card. It said just his name, comma, Magician. I didn't notice until the elevator closed that there was the silhouette of a bird on the other side. I felt worn to my bones. I tucked his card into my clutch. I reapplied my lipstick, rearranged my hair, and found Mike, whose commentary on my absence was to give his take, somehow both sweet and mean, on the predictable shenanigans I'd missed, and to observe that I'd lost my feather. “You love that feather!” He looked so genuinely dismayed for me.

When I got home, I looked for the card in my clutch, wanting to throw it away before I had to explain its existence. But it had already disappeared.

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The magician did make a sort of believer of me. I clung to the cramped beauty of that secret evening with a desperate need to believe that constituted basically the same kind of faith my mother's God demanded. But not much changed in the outer-life of Kate. Except that I did look for him, over the years. For months, I watched for my card, nine of hearts or Jack of diamonds, expecting it to appear somewhere. Eventually, as my obsession went unabated, I took an approach less reliant on that kind of magic and more reliant on the magic of the Internet. I learned that he lived in a place called Gowanus, which I discovered was both a toxic canal and a neighborhood in Brooklyn, and I began my excursions there, first weekly, then monthly, and then as the obsession waned, whenever the occasional impulse struck and I could get away, as with today. Today there was an article on the cover of the *Post*, one of those stories that seem to happen over and over, over the years: some endangered bird of prey nests in some municipal building inevitably grandiose in either form or function, and we marvel that such wildness finds its way into our urban world in the first place, and

that it then chooses to roost here. This time it was a family of peregrine falcons, nesting in City Hall, which the Post managed to construe as: "ENDANGERED MARRIAGE: mates-for-life Perry and Ginny stick it out above City Hall". A picture, an action shot, of one of them nest-building, a stick in its beak, wings spread wide for a landing. It was probably Ginny, making their home egg-ready. Making their home a home.

I decided it was time for another Gowanus excursion. It had been a while. I no longer go hoping to see the magician. I go to commune with that secret, with that evening of my under-table unraveling, with the basic truth he posited, that I *could*, that I wasn't, in fact, trapped, that all I needed was to choose to and I could as good as fly.

I got out of the F train, walked to the bridge I favored, the drawbridge on cobblestoned Carroll Street, and sat down and dangled my feet over its edge. I saw it right away: a birdcage, bobbing on the surface beneath me, a simple black empty antique birdcage that could've been anyone's but I knew, I *knew*, was his.

I stood up and looked around, my heart my own little living bird within me, where is he, where is he, where is he?

I paced the bridge. I traversed both edges of the canal, which is no small feat requiring trespassing and fence-climbing, and I knocked on doors and garages and asked total strangers if they'd seen the magician. I stepped right up to the edge of my inner under-table Kate, and then I walked back to my bridge, and sat down.

What was it that buoyed the birdcage, there in the canal? Was it the clench of some disease that plagued the water, the diseases that make of the canal a body thick with tissues and run through with pain, that make it reject any offering, like the beer can floating there, or the shoe over there, or the birdcage, or the bra I once saw floating cups up, looking like a sleeping mask? Was it simple physics I'm not equipped to imagine? Or was it magic?

I cried. I couldn't help it.

I have a bad secret. An untold truth I've tamped down. A pearl. Mike and I have tried and tried to get pregnant these past few years. Not since the magician, exactly, but not exactly not. We've tried all

kinds of magic, homeopathic and acrobatic, contorting ourselves and monitoring ourselves and doing everything but the medical thing, ostensibly because I'm scared to death of doctors, but in the pearl-hard version of reality I'm terrified that Mike will find out that I never stopped taking the pill.

I am not a nest builder.

It's not too late, everyone says. Just wait. When you least expect it. Watch. You'll get twins!

I don't even know if I want one.

I watched the birdcage float.

I knew what I needed to say, the only thing I could say.

I'm sorry.

