

THE SONGBIRD AND ME

by Paul Steven Stone

"Tell me again," you whisper softly, "about the songbird."

The words rise out of the darkness of our shared bedroom, and I know if I turn around I'll find you staring at me.

"Again?" I complain into the pillow. "Do I have to . . . ?"

"Tell me again," you tenderly insist. "I want to hear about the songbird."

I shift under the covers, turning slowly, until I'm lying on my back staring up at the ceiling.

"Okay," I sigh, vaguely aware of something stirring inside me. "We are all searching for the same thing . . ." I begin.

"Happiness," you declare like a proud schoolchild.

"Yes, call it that if you wish—happiness, love, contentment—we're all thirsting for it, but sadly we never learned how to find it."

"And why is that?" you prod.

"Because nobody knows where to look. Or what to look for. Because each person is searching for something different, and most look for it outside themselves . . ."

"And you can't find it on the outside?"

"No, you can't," I reply softly, the words carrying their own strange sadness.

"So where can it be found?"

"Where it lives, on the inside—inside yourself—waiting to be discovered."

"So when something from the outside touches you, and seems to bring happiness . . .?" you ask playfully. "Something like a songbird?"

"You must learn to let it sing, and be grateful for what you are given. As soon as you try to capture it, or own it, or demand more, it's like catching the songbird in your hand. How easily you can squeeze the life from a songbird when you try to capture its song."

“How sad,” you say, your voice filling with regret. “To kill the very thing you love by holding it too tightly.”

“Yes, it is sad,” I agree. “Very sad. The moral of the story is to look to yourself for your happiness, not to others. Which means looking to yourself—and yourself alone—for whatever love you need. Learn that, or spend the rest of your days squeezing the life from each songbird that flies into your world.”

“But tell me again,” you whisper, “about the songbird!”

“Again?” I reply, confused. “I just told you.”

“I couldn't hear,” you sadly insist. “I was too far away.”

Too far away . . . ?

As questions begin to rise, something shifts in my understanding. A veil has been lifted, and suddenly I am no longer confused.

I lift my head from the pillow, awake enough now to remember where I am, and to recall with a familiar ache that you no longer lie here beside me in our bed.

Your words are not real, I must now admit to myself. They are merely echoes in the mind calling out in love's familiar voice. And though it may be the middle of the night, it is also weeks since you left—flew away—from this bedroom and this life of ours.

There is a part of me that wants to hold onto the things that bring me happiness; to hold them in my hand so they won't fly away. But there is also a part of me that knows you have to free all songbirds and let them fly away—if fly away they must. That is the part of me I value most, the part that needs more room to grow. The part that will one day discover that the love I've been seeking on the outside has been waiting for me, all along, on the inside.

But until that day—until I come to know that love as well as I know this hollow ache in my chest--I will lie here each night listening for your song.

Only to hear a familiar voice softly calling.

“Tell me again about the songbird.”

