

Bird In the House

by Spencer Troxell

There's a bird in the house, and I'm chasing it around with a white paper shopping bag from some fancy clothing outlet. The bag has tightly wound paper handles that I'm grasping in each hand, and its aggravated mouth must look very threatening to the little charcoal-colored bird, because it's flying around like crazy, bumping into every shut window it can while completely overlooking the wide open door that it flew in through in the first place.

I'm thinking, 'If only you were a little less stupid...' as I climb up on a big pile of mats to reach the thing as it catches its breath up in one of the high windows. We're in the homeless shelter—it used to be a meeting place for teamsters, but the guy bought it back in the seventies and turned it into a place for people to drop in and sleep, and get a meal, and maybe talk to someone about their addiction (if applicable) on the way out. It's got these high, barred up windows, and the bird is sitting up there with its mouth open like it's thirsty, panting, trying to figure out what its next move is going to be. Probably not out the door, I'm going to have to catch it I think. One of us is going to get tired eventually, and I'm betting on the bird. I'm pretty big and wide, full of energy, plus I just ate a big meal and I slept pretty well last night. One of the guys who stays in the shelter (we call them clients) comes into the dorm: 'Somebody's gonna die in here.' He says, 'Bird in the house means somebody's gonna die.' And I wince because that stuff always gets to me. Even though I'm a professed skeptic, science doesn't go all the way to my core; There's a lot of voodoo under my skin. 'Hey!' I say to one of the other clients 'Go get a sheet!' and the guy runs off to get a sheet. The other guy stands there shaking his head and watching me run around with the bag, although I'm a lot more thoughtful about my movements now than when I was alone; I'm a little self conscious with an audience. The client I had sent away comes back in with a big white sheet to match my white paper bag, and we're running around while the

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other guy is still standing there just shaking his head, like it's our fault or something that the bird got in; like it's just one more shitty thing he has to deal with. 'Somebody's gonna die in here.' He says, and I want to tell him to shut up talking like that, but I can't.

The little creature isn't going to get into the bag. I might've had a chance that first time I approached him, when I tripped and blew it, but now he thinks I want to eat him.

There's some pride on the line now. These two clients are both older than me, and much harder. Instead of trying to support some kind of stupid illusion that I'm not comfortable with in the first place, and have no right to even if I were comfortable with it, I give a palms-open shoulder shrug. This bird is kicking my ass.

Many of the clients at the shelter have my deep respect. Some of them are sad cases, for sure; People who have given up on life, or have never gotten started with it in the first place. Many have mental issues, and are unable to get appropriate service because the system is broken, and there's no money to be made helping crazy homeless people. Many struggle with addiction, which is the closest thing to demonic possession there is in this world. Many are a mixture of the two, which is a destructive cocktail. Others are something else. There are a lot of war veterans, and what people refer to as 'unskilled laborers', although I hate that word. This last batch I mention is the first group of people in our economy to get fucked when someone on Wall Street makes a stupid or greedy move and everything goes haywire. They spend a lot of time hanging around at temp agencies, waiting for some hours doing hard labor for very little pay, or hanging around on the street outside the shelter at night waiting for some contractor to come by and pick them up in his truck, which is a kind of soft slavery in my mind.

Because of the way our society is structured, a lot of people have to climb hard to get to anywhere reasonable in their lives, losing

fingernails and a sense of dignity on the way up. I respect that struggle. They're at war for their very lives in a country that loves and glorifies war, but refuses to honor these particular soldiers with any kind of mythology of patriotism and purpose. No talk radio host is going to thump their chest to raise awareness of the very real dangers these soldiers face on the battlefield. No Republican politician is going to sound the horn in honor of the sacrifices that must be made by them to preserve their mere being, the country of themselves. They are P.O.W's in their own nation.

I grew up in the suburbs, have never been cold for too long, am lucky enough to have been born white and male and American, and have had plenty of time to ponder the academic and esoteric with friends and family over food and drink that costs way too much. I've had trials in my life just as everyone has, but there's always been a safety net there for me that's probably curbed the reality of a lot of what I've experienced. It would be silly of me to start barking orders, or to act out on that twinge-impulse that I feel to 'save face'. There's nothing to save. It's a silly situation, and these guys have seen it before: white liberal in dress pants and a button down collared shirt can't resolve a sticky situation. One of the guys laughs, and I laugh too. Even Mr. Superstitious cracks a smile. 'That fucking thing is fast'. I say. 'How's your cholesterol man, your face is flushed!' says the client with the sheet. 'don't die trying to save a bird!' 'No one gets left behind.' I say grimly. 'Ooh-rah!' says Mr. Superstitious.

Suddenly, the bird takes flight, and dips low towards the door, landing right in front of it. We can all feel each other tense up as we lean forward, waiting to see what happens. Casually, the bird hops out into the courtyard. We smile at each other and follow it out.

The other birds are waiting in an unbroken black mass across the street in the park. When our accidental captive rejoins

them—disappearing vertically down into their numbers—it is as if a hand grenade had been thrown at a solid body; pieces explode upwards and outwards, flapping frantically in all directions. The earth erupts with birds. Eventually, a swirling coherence is established and in one dark cloud they all fly off together across the cobblestone road and over the spires of a crumbling church. 'There.' I say. 'No one died.'

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