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TAXIDERMY

LILY CLAIMED, in that voice of utter certainty that only older siblings possess, that our mother was dying. Mama had just backed out the living room door, her hands pressed to her belly like a wounded gunman. She'd left blood pooling in her empty seat.

"Women bleed," I said. "It's normal." That was the remark made by my science teacher, Mr. Randall, when describing the astounding behavior of bats and horseshoe crabs. But in fact I could no more imagine myself spontaneously bleeding than I could imagine hanging upside down to sleep.

"That's normal?" Lily gestured at the soiled chair.

I could see her point. The blood gleamed like the puddle left in the driveway after our father changed the car oil.

Lily edged closer. "We ought to mop it up," she said.

"To wash out blood always use cold water," I added, quoting Mama as I peered down at the stain.

At that moment the bathroom door swung open and Mama emerged, wearing her robe but with her hair still coiled neatly at her neck. Without looking at either of us she marched toward the chair, which was surrounded by boxes of the Christmas tree ornaments we'd been removing. We parted to let her through, glad for once not to be what provoked her. She stripped off the seat cover and returned to the hallway, where she pulled down the steep ceiling stairs to the attic.

When she descended she clutched a white dust cover, in which she encased the chair. Then she whirled on us. "Haven't you two got anything better to do than plague your poor mother?"

Our shoulders drooped but we didn't budge. Mama stood there, twirling her wedding ring as she scrutinized us. Then she sighed and placed her hands heavily atop our heads, as if to keep us from growing any taller. "I'll be fine," she said in a soothing voice. I noticed though that she assured us only about the future, as if first there would be something to endure. Since summer she had for a week each month refused

to leave the house, and recently she'd become reluctant to venture out at all. Sheets spun in the washer most mornings, and Mama, never one to go without matching handbag and shoes, now often wore her robe at the dinner table.

"Go on and finish stripping the tree," she said. It was a few days after Christmas, and she always insisted the tree come down before New Year. Lily and I would have kept it standing until every last needle had fallen.

Mama went to rest while we returned to the ornaments. Mama bled, Lily declared, because of us, but because we hadn't chosen to be born it was not our fault.

"Remember Killer?" she asked, plucking a wooden angel off the tree.

The previous August we had seen our labrador retriever give birth. Afterwards she had just lain there while the puppies pushed at her with their moist snouts. The two runts died of their own accord, too small to fight for food and unwilling to take cow's milk from an eyedropper. Then Killer rolled over and suffocated two more. Mama said that was nature's way of working things out, because Killer didn't have enough milk for all of them. "Or nipples," Lily had added. But why would nature give Killer twelve puppies and only eight teats in the first place, and then make such sorrowful adjustments? Mr. Randall could have given me a satisfactory explanation, but I couldn't bring myself to mention teats to him.

I climbed onto a footstool to reach the higher branches, and passed green and red glass globes down to Lily. As I reached for a reindeer I saw a dark blur hovering in the corner of my eye, like a splotch on my glasses. The blur zoomed toward me and thudded into the window.

"Did you see that?" I leapt to the floor. "Maybe it's a meteor, or a flying squirrel."

"It's just a bird," Lily said, which I knew at once was true. We rushed outside and rustled in the wet bushes.

"Don't touch it," she said when we found the bird. Its wings were folded around its body like a vampire's cape. "We need a stretcher," she said. We ran back into the house.

"What are y'all up to?" Mama called from her room.

Lily shook her head vigorously.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Don’t forget to practice.” We had to play the piano every day for fifteen minutes.

“We won’t,” Lily said. She rolled her eyes. She hated to be reminded of anything, even if she would have forgotten otherwise.

We found a flat baking pan with burn stains in the bottom, and the long-handled spatula that Dad used for cook-outs. Lily scooped up the bird and laid it on the pan, which she then lifted above her head, as a waiter would carry a flaming dessert. We paraded into the bathroom.

My breath stirred the feathers. “Is it dead?”

“Any worms?” Lily replied.

“It’s way too soon for that.” But I moved back a bit, as she had intended. We delighted in disgusting each other. “Maybe it’s just stunned from the impact,” I said. Mr. Randall often proposed this theory when examining animals the class discovered in the patch of woods bordering the school. He said this in a hopeful tone as he stooped over wood mice and insects that anyone could see were quite plainly dead.

Lily nudged the bird with the spatula. It rolled away from the metal, then back into its former posture. “It’s dead,” she announced.

I put my thumb on its breast. The feathers were still warm underneath. I imagined how a bird would breath when frightened: frenetically, as though its body were a balloon it wanted to blow up, but that somewhere a tiny hole was letting all the air out. If it were alive I couldn’t help but feel its heart, beating so much faster than my own. The smaller the bird, I knew, the swifter the heartbeat.

“It’s dead,” I said.

“Obviously. Let’s toss it.”

“No, I’ll take it to school as a specimen.”

“Yuck.” Since turning twelve Lily did not much like nature anymore. I sped to the den for *Peterson’s Field Guide to Eastern Birds*. Although I had never identified anything by myself, I had watched over Mr. Randall’s shoulder when he did so.

As I loved the box turtle, the pileated woodpecker, and the loblolly pine, so also did I love Mr. Randall. It was not a romantic love but a scientific one. He stood, after all, six foot five, with a head that seemed

nearly as large as my torso. He moved the way I imagined the brontosaurus had, with a ponderous grace. He was gentle, tender even, with the creatures, dead or living, that he presented to us. The thick blonde hair on his knuckles and forearms seemed to prove his connection to the natural world, as if he had grown fur on purpose, to protect himself from the elements. I wanted his massive hands to soothe me as he did the frantic injured animals children brought to class. For months I had longed to bring him one he had never seen before, which it might take hours to identify. Together we would pore over field guides, in search of a name for that mysterious beast.

In my room I held the bird. Unruffled and unwounded, it seemed merely to be resting. I always forgot the near weightlessness of birds, although Mr. Randall had told us how the shaft of their feathers, and even their bones were filled with air. He had told us too why we could never fly. More oxygen is needed for flight than can be obtained from simply breathing, so birds store oxygen in their muscle tissue, which humans cannot do. At Christmas dinner I had announced that dark meat is dark because it's muscle full of oxygen. "You mean we're eating *muscle*?" Lily'd said, a drumstick suspended before her face.

Below me in the living room she plunked the piano keys to the thud of the metronome. I stretched out one of the bird's wings to look for markings. Although endearingly plump, it was a dun-colored, in no way splendid bird, surely a female. I set it on my desk and opened the field guide.

The birds in the book perched on disembodied branches, sometimes with berries or bugs lodged in their beaks, or a fish or mouse caught in their talons. There were ghoulish close-ups of lobed feet and saw-edged mandibles, and views of birds hovering or plunging or taking off from the water.

Occasionally I came across a drawing of an extinct bird—the Carolina parakeet, the Labrador duck—distinguished from the others by the black circle around it and the fact that, like a mug shot or a cameo, only the head was depicted. In his science presentation Barry Martin had said that the sky had once been filled with passenger pigeons, millions to a flock, so many that sometimes they eclipsed the sun. The term "stool pigeon," he explained, derived from their capture: one was caught and tied to a post with its eyelids sown shut, until eventually its

calls drew the flock down, to be easily clubbed to death. The image of the bound, blinded bird haunted me. Not because I bemoaned the loss of all those pigeons, a drab, unappealing species. Rather I wanted to know why they had sealed its eyes, which neither Barry nor Mr. Randall could answer. Would the bird not have cried out, I wondered, if it had seen what it was causing?

After examining all possible candidates, I conceded that my bird was an ordinary house wren. Described as “energetic” but, lamentably, “stumpy,” I couldn’t even be sure it was female, for at the top of the page was the statement, “sexes alike,” a notion which made me rather uncomfortable.

If it had to be homely, I thought, at least it could have been rare—like the dusky seaside sparrow, whose lyrical name I remembered because Mr. Randall said he longed to see one. But any bird, I figured, was better than no bird. I pictured the wren in Mr. Randall’s cupped hand, cradled there like a dumpling in a deep ladle. What did it matter its rarity or beauty? Mr. Randall had thus far displayed no such prejudices. Rather he examined each creature as if it might well be the only one of its kind, or perhaps the last. In order to preserve the bird until my return to school, I wrapped it in plastic and a brown bag and stashed it in the back of the freezer, hoping no one would mistake it for food.

That night our father took Lily and me to the cinema, although we knew he disliked the kinds of movies we were allowed to see. Without complaint he gave us money for sodas, popcorn, and Milk Duds while he had a last cigarette outside. It was a Thursday but he was dressed like on the weekend, in his old khakis and a flannel shirt. The smoke rose up around him as heat did off the hood when he left the car running, empty, on cold mornings.

In the dark before the previews he told us not to worry, that Mama was going to be fine. “It’s just female trouble,” he whispered, as if that explained everything. But we were hardly comforted, for wasn’t female the one thing she would always be?

The next day she covered the chair she’d stained—and any others she might want to sit on—with plastic. Although I didn’t complain, I

feared returning home one day to find everything in the house, even our beds, swathed in a slick, translucent skin. How could we ever again use those chairs if she died? I wondered. It would be like sitting on tombstones.

When school resumed in January, I put the frozen and seemingly heavier bird alongside the sandwich and apple in my lunchbox. In the wash-room I poured my juice down the sink and tried to insert the wren into my thermos, to keep it cold until science class met at the end of the day, but it wouldn't fit. All morning and afternoon I worried that the bird was rotting in my locker. In our house milk, meat, and butter were immediately returned to the refrigerator after use, and when we went to restaurants Mama sniffed the food before we could eat it. "It's gone off," she'd say if she found it questionable, as though the tuna fish or egg salad had, with intentional malice, run away from us.

But the wren did not decompose in the hours before its presentation to Mr. Randall. In fact it hadn't even thawed completely when, after class, I unwrapped the soggy bag. This did not, however, diminish Mr. Randall's delight.

"A wren!" he cried. "We haven't had one of those this year."

I beamed with pride. "It's dead, though," I said, not wanting him to embarrass himself.

"Unfortunately yes." He bent his huge frame to examine the bird where it lay on the table. "But it's certainly in good condition. Where did you find it?"

"It smashed into our window. I was standing right there. Is it true that when they see their reflection they think it's another bird?"

"An interesting hypothesis. I assumed they flew into windows because they didn't see any reflection at all."

"Oh. My sister said they just didn't recognize themselves."

"How is Lily?"

I hated his saying her name, though of course she'd been his student the year before, a fact I tried to forget. "She wanted to bury it."

"Well, I'm glad she didn't." He placed the wren in his palm and stroked its wing with his index finger. "If you want I can stuff it for you, Celia. Then you can have it always."

He straightened, lifting the bird for further inspection. Its legs jutted stiffly into the air. "I'm only an amateur taxidermist," he said, returning the wren to his raised palm, out of my sight. "Nothing fancy, but it will keep for a long time if you store it properly. I'm afraid I can't do it in front of the class because parents might object. But as soon as I have time I could work on it at home."

He lowered his hand slowly, as if he held jewels or candy or some surprise for me. I touched the bird's head gingerly with my fingertip.

"Okay," I said, although I wasn't really sure I wanted to have this bird always. I had intended, after all, to give it to him.

During the fall Lily and I had watched with dismay as Mama steadily shed her bright clothes. When she did change out of her robe it was for dresses that hung on her like sacks, or slacks at least a size too large. She favoured gloomy prints and floral patterns to disguise any accidents. Eventually she donned a long dark raincoat every time she went out, whatever the weather. After a while these clothes ceased to remind us of her impending demise and became instead her ingenious means of humiliating us. "Disgraced by your old mother?" she sometimes taunted. We shook our heads but she would just laugh. She could always tell when we were embarrassed by her.

Even on those days which she spent entirely in bed, Lily and I doubted sometimes that Mama was really sick. Maybe, we whispered, she was just using her illness as a ploy to make us do what she wanted. "Settle down," she'd yell from the bedroom. "*Behave.*" She said she was tired, but she didn't sound tired. She seemed far too aggravated to be tired.

That first day after vacation she buttoned her raincoat over her nightgown and picked us up at school. I crawled hurriedly into the backseat, not bothering to battle with Lily over the front. Mama asked us how our day went. "Fine," we droned. I didn't mention the bird, fearing it might cause her to raise any number of objections—sanitation, or wholesomeness, or some indisputable idea of what befits young girls. My strategy was that once she saw the wren, stuffed and comely, she wouldn't be able to refuse it.

That evening over waffles Mama declared that she was sick of being an invalid and would resume her weekly trips to the gym. Lily and I

groaned, knowing that meant we would accompany her each Wednesday after piano lessons.

“Always exercise, girls,” Mama said, refilling the pitcher with warm syrup. Despite our present scrawniness, she said, the fat would catch up with us later if we weren’t careful. She made it seem as though when we were grown our bodies would be in constant, anxious pursuit of us, or we of them.

A week after I gave Mr. Randall the bird, we went with Mama to the gym. She started with the machines, inserting her black-clad thighs into the wide canvas belt and bending her knees slightly. I waited by the controls.

“I hate my legs,” Mama said with matter-of-fact distaste, looking down as if such a declaration could convince them to walk off without her. This was the cue. I flipped the switch and Mama began to vibrate. She tried to look composed but I could tell she disliked jiggling in public. Her skin rippled like a cake before baking, when you shimmy the pan back and forth to get the batter level.

I worried that she would bleed, which she hadn’t done since our return to school. When we were ill she always told us to keep still, as though sickness were an object we held balanced inside, which if agitated would fall deeper into the body, where she might be unable to retrieve it. The machine churned and ground. How could something that made such a noise not be forcing her illness farther and farther inside her? Suddenly and horribly I could picture it, coiled and growing within her like a tapeworm, which in second grade we’d been shown magnified pictures of, to discourage us from going barefoot and sucking our dirty fingers.

“Celia,” Mama said. “What is it?” She reached over and turned off the machine. I wondered if I would ever learn to hide myself from her.

“You’re all green and bug-eyed,” Lily said.

“Are you coming down with something?” Mama placed her palm on my forehead. “You’re not hot.”

“But you look awful,” Lily said.

“Fetch a glass of water please, Lil,” Mama said. Lily sauntered off, as Mama lifted my chin with her finger. “What is it, Celia?”

How could I ask if she was dying? If she assured me she wasn’t I would not believe her, but if she told me she was I didn’t really want

to know. My eyes roved the room, coming to rest on a large blonde lady pedaling a stationary bicycle. The fat on her back bulged around her bra straps and she panted rapidly, like Killer did after chasing squirrels.

“I hate it here,” I said. “Everybody’s so old and ugly.”

Mama let go my chin abruptly. “My, my, the things you have to suffer.” She stepped out of the machine. “Remember that when you get to be my age.”

“I didn’t mean you,” I said. “You’re pretty.”

“Why, thank you.”

I dropped my head and stared at her rounded belly where once, quite inconceivably, I had dwelled. Overcome by the fact of this I lowered my gaze to her thighs. After a moment she blushed and glanced down, checking herself, I knew, for leaks.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“I’ll be my old self again soon,” she said. “Until then I just need you to be patient.”

“She’s no good at that,” Lily said, returning with the water.

“Nor, young lady, are you,” Mama said, swatting her on the backside. She took the cup and offered it to me before having a sip herself.

“All aboard who’s going aboard.” As a treat Mama sometimes let us use the machine after she’d finished. We climbed in and the strap encircled us. Lily’s hipbones poked into my belly. Then Mama flipped the switch and set us trembling. She stood there and considered us as, giggling and shaking and sucking in our stomachs, we pretended to be her.

The next Sunday Lily and I went with Mama to church. Our father attended only on holidays, but Mama liked to go as regularly as her illness allowed. That morning I felt a heady blend of pride and mortification when I stood beside her in the pew. Her left hand held the hymnal open but as usual she did not look at it. She knew all the words, or made them up if she didn’t. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back like an opera singer. It was not the singing itself—the flat, toneless notes belted out unreservedly—which so embarrassed, but her heartfelt love of it, that brazenness to which I was also drawn. Lily and I scooted closer to her, our hands on the mahogany pew in

front of us like those of rowers gripping a long oar, as though we were moving ourselves across a wide expanse of water, journeying someplace together. We pointed our chins toward heaven, crooning.

Outside it was cold and rainy. After church, piano practice, and dinner, Mama napped and our father read the paper while we snuck into the guestroom, where we were not allowed. It was like going into another house, the house of our mother's girlhood, when we entered this room. A large framed photograph of her at sixteen hung between her twin four-poster beds. Her dresser squatted opposite, its innards concealed by a polka-dotted cloth draped across the front.

The dresser stood empty but for a few hair ribbons, Grandmother's silver-backed brush, and in the central, largest drawer, the sewing kit with its hundreds of spools of thread. Organized by shade and tone, it contained more hues than the largest-ever box of crayons.

We made up names for the colors. "Marshgrass," Lily said, holding up the end of that bright green thread.

"Roseate Spoonbill." I unravelled a dark pink one. Since finding the wren I often studied the field guide, so that I could discuss birds with Mr. Randall. "Mallard's head." I wrapped each named thread around my wrist. "Beak of a Caspian tern."

"Blueberries and strawberries mashed together." She was trying to outdo me. "Inside of a cat's mouth." Then she took a different tack. "A swollen tick in Killer's ear."

"Knee scab."

"The pus when you pull it off too soon."

I chose the very reddest thread. "Mama's insides," I said.

Lily glared at me. "Stupid," she said. "Blood's not really that color."

I bounced lightly on the bed. "Mr. Randall's stuffing the bird for me," I said.

"For us, you mean. That bird's half mine."

"But you wanted to throw it away." I sprang higher. "You're not even in his class anymore."

"I found it," she said, straddling a bedpost like it was a fireman's pole.

"We both found it."

"Exactly." She argued just like our father did, with ruthless logic, whereas I, like our mother, often simply wept, overcome by my own

righteousness. Arguments to me had nothing to do with reason; their sole concern was justice.

“It’s not fair,” I muttered.

We looked up then at the photo of our mother, as if she had just scolded us for quarreling. In this picture she resembled Judy Garland in the *Wizard of Oz*, although when I’d told her so she’d said, “I only wish.” Her lips and cheeks had been obviously reddened by the photographer’s brush. They did not hesitate to make improvements in those days. Her skin glowed smooth and flawless as she had told us it never did in real life. But it was her smile that we wanted, that we kept returning to. Years later I realized it was a smile of self-possession. It was entirely hers, not a result of touching up. She must have been enjoying one of those rare moments when she thought herself undeniably lovely, a creature deserving of attention and praise. It was that smile which made her look mysterious, poised, not our mother.

In February I dreamt about the bird. Although it remained brown, its plumage had deepened to the color of pecans. It appeared larger, even plumper, and its wings extended fully. In the dream the bird still lived, although it nonetheless required Mr. Randall’s attention. He had built it a fabulous roost, carved of stone but made to look like the gnarled branch of an oak. The bird perched there, calling, its eyes opened wide. Suddenly it flew straight above us and we saw in the hollow beneath its wings a flash of yellow and emerald green, as if, like a reversible shirt, it wore on its underside the coat of a parrot.

When I woke and remembered the dream I thought about those displays I’d seen the year before, when we visited New York’s Natural History Museum. Behind the thick glass, lions and ostriches posed majestically, oblivious to their urban surroundings. Up close you could see the dust and grime coating the fur and feathers, but still the taxidermist had captured some movement—stalking, crouching, landing, the preparation for flight—which seemed to represent the very nature of each particular animal.

I speculated about exactly how Mr. Randall would arrange the wren. Nesting, hovering, soaring, or perhaps perching daintily with a red rubberband (in lieu of a worm) snared in its tiny talons? Each day

when I entered science class I felt jittery with anticipation, that I would find the bird poised on his desk.

But weeks passed and the wren did not reappear. Mr. Randall mentioned it a few times, saying that he was awfully busy, that it was taking longer than he'd expected, that he hadn't stuffed birds before. I suspected that the wren, thawed for all this time, had finally gone off. I pretended not to care, although weeks earlier I'd cleared my rock collection from the top of my bookshelf, to allow the best possible viewing area for the forthcoming magnificent bird.

At the beginning of March Lily inquired about, as she put it, *our* bird. "Maybe he ate it instead," she said.

"You're just jealous."

"Of a dead bird? I don't even like that old pervert."

"He's not a pervert," I said, certain that a pervert was someone who would do unseemly things to birds.

"You've got a crush on Frankenstein." Many of the kids called Mr. Randall that, due to his large head.

I did not deign to respond. Instead I pictured Lily shrinking rapidly, to the size of a cat, a bird, a mouse. Then I put a falcon into the sky above us, circling. In my study of birds I had again come across the practice of stitching the eyes closed; that is, seeling them—in falconry there was even a term for it. To take away the falcon's greatest gift was to tame it, a method I could not reconcile with what Mr. Randall had boldly taught us: that each creature existed in the world not for us, but for itself. So my imaginary falcon did not require blindness to love me. From a great height it saw me beckon. Then it dove down to pluck the miniature Lily up and carry her away, unharmed, but to where she could no longer torment me.

We hadn't seen Mama bleed again, although from our regular inspection of the trashcan we knew she continued to do so clandestinely. She neither improved nor worsened, and eventually the fact that she rarely left the house, nor invited anyone to it, came to seem almost normal. Occasionally I was tempted by the sympathy I could've received from teachers, or the gawking awe of classmates, had I told them that something was wrong with my mother. But I kept silent, as did Lily. It was

as though we were the ones who had to wear pads as thick as diapers and sit on plastic-covered chairs—where, indeed, we made sure never to sit.

On weekends Dad took us to play in the park or with friends, giving us the dubious distinction of being the only children accompanied by a father to birthday parties. When we returned, Mama would be waiting. “Tell me everything,” she’d say, which we never could.

As Mama failed to expire, Lily and I resumed our assumption of her survival, although our assurance was never again as deeply unwavering as before. But as the days warmed we chanted alongside friends, “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back,” and planted our feet on the fissures in the sidewalk, with a bearable, exhilarating fear. To do so meant she wouldn’t die. What was stated out loud couldn’t possibly happen.

Toward the end of March, when I had given up my yearning glances toward Mr. Randall’s desk, he brought in the bird.

“Celia,” he said after class, as I gathered my books to depart. “I have your wren.” He went to his desk and opened the largest drawer. “As I said, I’m just an amateur. But I think it turned out alright—or she, to be precise, as it’s a female.”

I recalled the field guide description, “sexes alike.” He must have deduced her gender from her insides. But what exactly had he seen there? The only thing I knew for sure about bird reproduction was that they laid eggs.

“I had a bit of trouble getting her to stand.” His enormous hands fluttered above the wren like a mother bird over a fledgling. “I wanted to stuff her with her wings out but she’d already spent too long with them folded.”

I approached his desk hesitantly, as if fetching a test I’d failed. The wren stood, still quite brown, with its feet strapped to a vertical stick jutting up from a wooden platform. Once so seemingly unperturbed, the bird now wore a forlorn expression, due primarily to its lack of brains, which Mr. Randall informed me must be removed in order to avoid later spoilage. I could discern no point of entry, though the proof of this procedure lay in the slightly deflated head, which resembled a balloon the day after a party; and the missing eyeballs, which made the bird appear perpetually squinting.

The beak hung open slightly, as if the wren had been caught in the midst of hunger or song. I could suspend a rubberband there but it would look nothing like a worm. The bird tilted its head slightly to one side, as birds often do. But something about the elongation of the wren's neck, and the particular angle at which its head twisted, suggested instead that its neck was broken. I couldn't remember whether or not it had died in that position.

Mr. Randall swayed above me like a pine in a storm. "Do you like her?" he asked.

I was stunned then to realize that he cared what I thought. I could only nod. It was too great an untruth to say out loud. Although I felt keenly disappointed—in the bird, in him—I did not want Mr. Randall to see my dismay, nor the fact that I had expected the bird to be far grander in death than in life. Where was the sublime essence of the creature, as in the museum? My wren had no essence, or else its essence was simply death.

I bent closer to the bird, delaying the moment when I would have to touch it. It smelled of chemicals, and the feathers were matted in places, as if it had been caught in the rain and not yet had a chance to fully dry. The wren's eyes had been replaced by glossy black ones, just visible between the almost closed lids, but slightly too small to fill the sockets. The bird bore a faint resemblance to Mrs. Higby, the blind woman who went to our church, whose eyes had given up any hope for this world and were retreating steadily into her head.

I thought abruptly of the passenger pigeon, and although the wren was nothing at all like a pigeon—having neither a pigeon's shapely head, nor its soothing coo—I knew that from then on I couldn't look at this wren, or any wren, maybe even any bird, without thinking of the passenger pigeon. All of that species' wretched history stood stuffed before me: bound to a post, sightless, crying.

"Thank you," I mumbled, clutching the wooden platform. I turned and fled his bewildered face. He called after me but I didn't stop. The wren, rigid and permanently unappeasable, I held as far away from me as possible, as if accidental death and petrification were, like so many harmful things, contagious.

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I showed the bird to no one. Certainly not my mother, who would have infuriated me by clucking over it sympathetically; or Lily, who would have ridiculed and demanded some rights to it. I suspected my father would simply have made some disparaging remark about Mr. Randall, whom I would then have to defend.

I had hidden the wren inside a box at the back of my closet, where I presumed my mother would eventually discover it, as she seemed to discover everything, but she never did. Neither Mr. Randall nor I mentioned it again. I avoided referring to any birds at all in his presence, for fear he'd be reminded of the wren and I'd have to exclaim over how I loved it.

I did not, however, abandon birds in general. For my birthday in April my parents gave me my own set of binoculars, which on weekends, despite Lily's mockery, I wore in a pouch at my waist. I spent much of that spring and summer looking skyward, in hopes of sighting some exotic stray from a zoo, or one of those tropical birds who had ventured north to breed. Mostly though I saw birds I'd seen all my life. But I learned their names and tastes and habits, and the far away places they'd flown from or would fly to, or whether, like me, they had lived here always.

In May Lily and I had our piano recital, to which the mother of a fellow student delivered us. From backstage we peeked through the curtains and scanned the aisles for Mama, who would not miss this for the world, she'd said, although she hadn't left the house in days. People were still coming into the stuffy room, greeting one another and finding seats. The audience consisted mostly of mothers, and siblings too young yet for piano lessons—plus a few fathers, in coats and ties, who'd gotten off work early. Ours had gone to Atlanta on business, so the previous night we had given him a dress rehearsal.

"There," Lily hissed, jerking her head toward the section of seats to the right. "Fifth row."

Although we'd been with Mama just that morning, the sight of her now, in her speckled maroon dress and black raincoat, was startling. The other mothers wore fluttery, diaphanous pastels, and Mama sat among them like a sparrow in a flock of painted buntings.

"Do you think she'll take her coat off? She looks like a gangster."

"Jesus," Lily said, a word we were supposed to use only in prayer.

Mama had not lied to us; she wasn't dying. But only after she had a hysterectomy the following autumn and wore again her luminous clothes would we consent to take her completely for granted. As we watched her through the curtains that spring afternoon, though, we wished simply that she would neither bleed nor die right then, in front of everyone.

We soon forgot her, however, as we were confident she never did us. Backstage a girl named Diane, a prize pupil, bent forward crisply at the waist and threw up. This both relieved and deepened our terror. What could Diane, who played the piano far better than we did, have to worry about? Mrs. Wilson, the piano teacher, calmly placed a sheet of newspaper over the mess and stroked Diane on the forehead. "All better now?" she asked, urging her towards the stage. The students crowded by the curtains to watch Diane faint or vomit or worse. But she played expertly, although her pale arms and neck prickled with goosebumps throughout her performance.

When my turn came I sat at the piano bench, curled my hands in my lap, and waited. The polished wooden floor shone around me like water. Mrs. Wilson had said that eventually the music would come to us, if only we were patient, a trait at which, as my family liked to point out, I did not excel. But I no longer aspired to patience. I wanted instead to be like the swallow-tailed kite I'd spotted the day before, skimming the surface of the pond with the force of a thrown stone. Such kites never hover, I'd read in the field guide, but hunt, eat and even drink in flight. I had been tempted to tell Mr. Randall of this rare sighting, but how could I broach the subject now? After months of not mentioning the wren, everything seemed, however remotely, to be about birds.

The room crouched behind me, waiting like an animal in the dark. I thought of what my mother would be doing then, what she always did when we caused her worry. With her right hand she would rotate her wedding ring to the left, as if opening something, a jar lid or the next to last twist of a combination lock. She would sit very straightly, as though indignant. At home when she caught me or Lily slumping she slid a yardstick down our shirts. She wouldn't pull it out until every knob of the spine pressed against the flexing wood.

My back remembered that yardstick and I sat up straighter on the piano bench. If I had turned to look I couldn't have seen my mother, gloomily clothed in the dim auditorium, but I didn't need to see her. I could feel her out there, twisting her ring, brooding over me and listening, the way she did when we were outside the house and she was in. Even when we ventured far out of earshot, beyond where she could help us if we came to harm, we felt her listening. This had always seemed as natural and immutable as air, but with a sudden awful clarity I knew that it was not just her, but this sense of being everywhere somehow heard, accounted for, that we would lose if she died. How could I predict that in only a few years I would wish her fierce attention elsewhere? At the time it was all I wanted. My fingers trembled with their memory of the notes and I lifted my hands to the keys. Mama's hands rested then in her lap. She leaned forward, towards me, and I began to play.